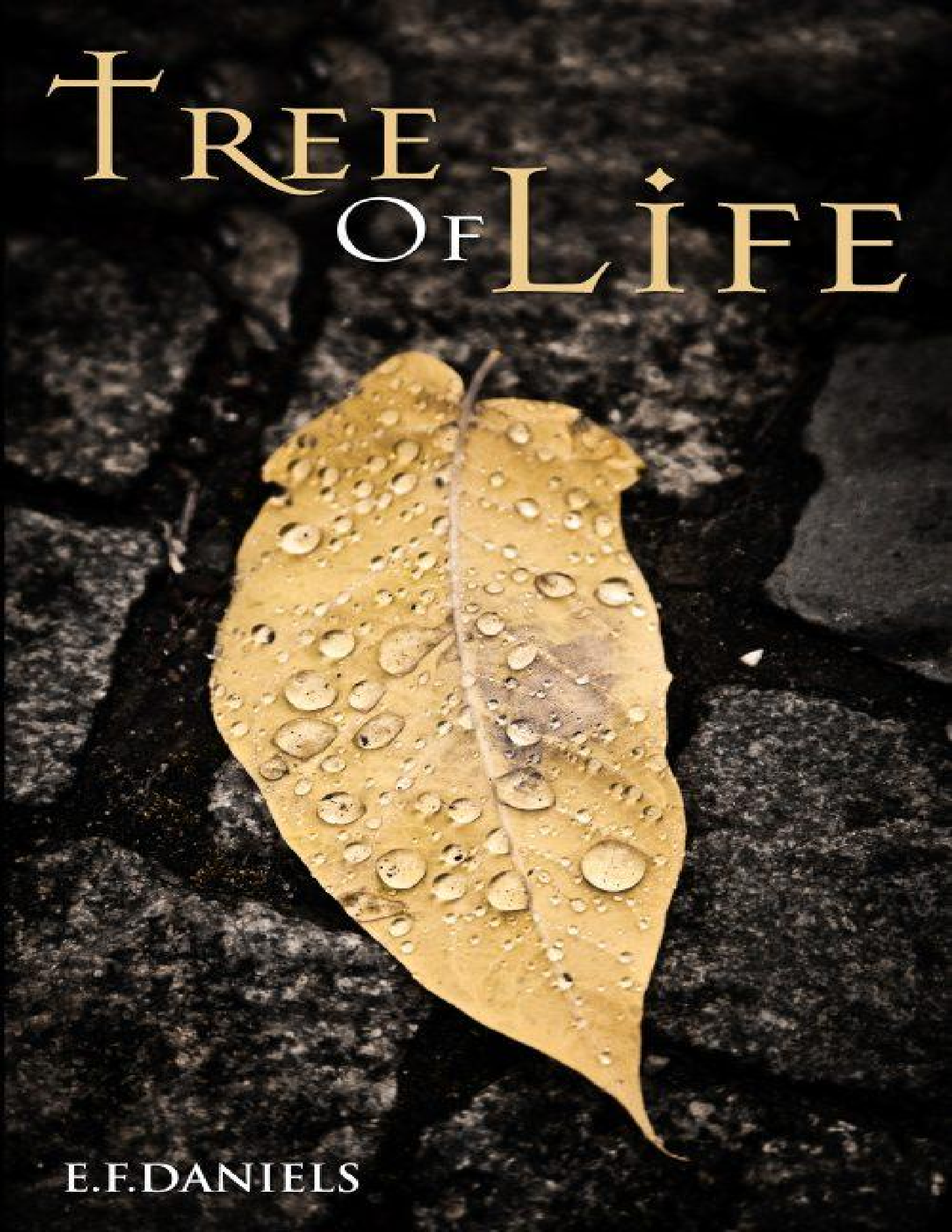
Tree of Life



E.F. DANIELS

Tree of life

Part I

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To my family, with gratitude and love

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Chapter 1
A Stolen Treasure

Against the blowing wind a young woman travelled through the night, nothing more than a thin shadow blending into the oppressive darkness. She was enveloped in a heavy cloak, clutching a small child to her like stolen treasure. With no moon or starlight to brighten the countryside, the only bastion in the encircling blackness was a small wayside inn. Dim light spilled out from its windows, and the smell of beer hung heavy in the air, along with the rich scents of roasting meats. As Daenara drew nearer she could hear raucous male laughter.

The brawling voices died as Daenara flung the door open. At several plain, unvarnished tables were scruffy travellers, and, standing behind the long unpolished counter, a stout man paused from cleaning an old mug. She could feel their displeasure at her intrusion, along with their lewd curiosity.

“Well, don’t just stand there letting in all the cold, woman!” one of the seated men said. “Shut the god-damned door!”

As she made her way toward the counter, she could feel their eyes follow her, not hostile, but intrusive. Her son, with his arms tight about her neck, did not once rouse his tired face but clung to his mother in a way that saddened rather than warmed the heart to see. A certain air of neglect and weariness, a sense of lost station, hung over her. She kept, therefore, a cautious reserve.

Only one other woman was present, a short, buxom person who was likely the innkeeper’s wife. She was busy over a hot oven. The air was filled with greasy smells. The innkeeper, resting on one elbow, bent over the counter toward Daenara. He abruptly offered her a meal and a room. She accepted only the room and a bed, much too weary to eat.

The inn-keeper charged her seven gold pieces. Daenara frowned at this, but did not argue the point. She placed the money on the inn-keeper’s thick,

fleshy palm, taking a large iron key in return. Without glancing back, she headed toward the small, shadowy staircase that disappeared round the corner. The men called to her, asking her to let the boy sit and drink with them a while. She ignored their entreaties and disappeared up the stairs as quickly and soundlessly as she could. Not till she had reached her room and fastened the door did she relax and set Deacon down. The room was sparse and uninviting with a small bed, a small table, and a wash basin, but it was warm.

She stripped off both their heavy cloaks and retrieved a chunk of herbed bread, neatly wrapped in cloth, from her bag. Meanwhile the little one surveyed his surroundings, clinging all the while to his mother's dress. He looked dazed and wide-eyed, turning back to his mother, desiring to be held again. He raised his arms to her, but she instead placed a piece of bread in his hand, urging him to eat.

His face sombre and serious, he ate without enthusiasm. Daenara partook of nothing herself. Her gaze settled on the small child who seemed like a little stranger to her, he was so quiet. She thought of the man they had fled, and she suddenly felt exhausted and ready to cry. She gently brushed the crumbs from Deacon's mouth. "Had enough?" she asked, in a voice tight with subdued emotion. Deacon nodded, handing back the half-chewed bread.

They soon crawled into bed. Snug against his mother, Deacon fell asleep immediately. She, however, lay in wretched wakefulness, her mind full of anguished thoughts. The bed was hard, the drab bedclothes coarse and heavy with dust. Her whole body ached, and she wished to roll over to get comfortable, but she dared not move, not wanting to wake Deacon, who even in his sleep clung fiercely to her. Nerve-worn, she could feel herself flinch inwardly with each burst of muffled laughter that came from downstairs.

Lying rigidly on her back, she felt an ache in her breast. Silently she wept out all the sorrow that had pressed against her heart these past months, her only comfort the small, fragile weight that lay bundled warm in her arms. Soon her son's steady breathing lulled her into sleep.

When she woke it was morning. Deacon's arm was slung loosely over her neck, his head turned away from her toward the wall. At moments like this she felt her heart would burst for love of him. He was so sound asleep that he didn't stir when she gathered him up. She was anxious to get to the Imperial city. There they would be safe.

Downstairs was empty, save for the few stragglers who had passed out at their tables in drunken stupors. With Deacon cradled fast in her arms, Daenara passed silently and unnoticed. Again they ventured out onto the road.

The day was almost spent by the time they reached the outskirts of the Imperial city. Scattered over the gentle, green slopes were stands of trees filled with game. No villages were along the way, but they passed an increasing number of small homesteads and farms.

Soon the sun began to die behind mountains thickly covered in fir trees. Fortunately the paved road provided easy footing. By nightfall they had reached the Angora river; the river extended in the same direction as the road, all the way up to the city gates. Daenara was weary, but her step was strong with the knowledge she had almost reached the city. She could see two brilliant flames burning at the front gates like welcoming beacons. She could also see the homestead and stables further up by the water's edge. The dim friendly glow gave her a sense of returning home.

A husky male voice suddenly cut through the dark and made her stop, her heart caught in her throat. "Evening, citizen," said the hulking city guard, stepping out from the shadow of a tree. "The gates to the city are closed at night. Don't despair. There is an inn not far back. It'll suit you and your little one just fine."

"I know the gates are closed. I was hoping you could make an exception and have them opened for me?" Daenara said. She was desperate to see her brother, and informed the guard of his high position in the Imperial legion. "Thaemon is his name. You perhaps know him?" she asked eagerly. The guard's stern face softened.

“I know him,” he said in a gruff, but friendly voice. “Go on. Mention my name to the men at the gates, and they’ll let you in.”

Daenara used his name and instructions, and was supremely relieved when the men admitted her. Even at night people wandered the handsome streets of the Imperial. Soft light issued from flames in open caskets and lit the streets all through the night. Every so often she saw a guard patrolling.

The city was divided into three districts: the markets, the residential, and the elven gardens. The latter was by reputation the most beautiful of all city gardens. Many years ago, when the Imperial was still young, elves had constructed the gardens as a gift for those humans who had fought bravely alongside them, though no elves actually lived there. Only the wealthiest could afford to reside in them, and only by invitation could one enter.

Daenara went directly to her brother’s fine home. Mindful not to sound too alarming, she rapped on the door and waited expectantly, huddled with Deacon not so much to keep warm as to supress her nervous shudders. Presently she heard quick, shuffling steps. The door opened, and Berrel, a short, well-rounded woman, stood in an inquiring manner.

The matronly servant looked out from under thinly plucked brows. She gazed at Daenara without recognition, before she exclaimed in a surprised and reproachful tone, “Daenara! Good heavens, child, did you walk all this way? Come in, come in. Let’s get you out of the night air.”

Somehow, among the small woman’s flustered attentions, Daenara managed to catch sight of Thaemon. Upon the sight of his sister, his face at once became serious and questioning. Behind him, huddled in the doorway, Thaemon’s wife shared her husband’s anxious interest.

Daenara set the little one down, but no sooner had she done so than he turned back with raised arms in mute appeal. She gathered him back up, and he clung to her neck sullenly. Thaemon placed a considerate hand round his sister’s shoulder. The other rested on the back of the boy’s head.

“Where is Luseph?” he asked. “Has he been unkind to you?” Thaemon assailed her with questions. In his fierce perplexity all considerate thought

for the travellers seemed lost. Finally his wife, Clara, placed her hand on his arm, and spoke kindly to Daenara.

“You must be tired. Come rest a moment.” Her voice was soft and pleasant.

In the dwelling-room the two women sat opposite one another in comfortable chairs. Deacon sat, heavy and dozy, bundled in his mother’s lap. Thaemon stood over by the fireplace. His face was solemn, and his eyes were fixed on his sister. He was a tall, proud man, respected by all who knew him for his integrity and inexhaustible kindness. Nobility, pride, and discipline all marked his features.

Clara also was well respected. She was a delicate woman with a proud bearing. With a steady, well-practiced hand she poured out the tea, placing the cup on a side table by Daenara. The room was richly furnished and exceedingly still and quiet. Clara and Thaemon had two children, a boy and a girl. Cedrik was Deacon’s age, while Brielle was two years younger. Daenara knew they had already been put to bed.

With languid caresses she continued to brush Deacon’s hair back from his face, hoping to lull him to sleep. Clara asked Deacon, “Is there something you would like, perhaps some warmed milk?”

By way of answer he turned inward, and buried his face as though the offer had offended him. He would not let her touch him.

The two women exchanged bleak smiles.

“He’s tired,” Daenara said.

“I’ve got water heating,” Berrel said, coming to the doorway. “You can have yourself a nice hot bath in a moment.” She stood with her hands on her ample hips. Daenara thanked her, then looked up and caught her brother’s troubled gaze set on her.

“Have you been to see Mother yet?” he asked.

“No. I came directly here,” she replied.

“Better to wait, I think, before mentioning this to her.”

The mother they shared lived further out from the Imperial in a small homestead. Thaemon’s father had died years before, while Daenara had never known hers; he had left when she was only a baby. Thaemon’s father had raised her as his own.

Drawing a long, considering breath, her brother seemed about to resume interrogations; when Daenara said in an imploring voice, “Perhaps it is best we retire for the evening?”

“Yes, yes. You are tired,” said Thaemon. “Get to bed. We shall talk more in the morning.”

Warmed by hot baths and comfortable in fresh changes of clothes, the travellers settled into a soft bed. The room was spacious and pleasant in temperature. Two glass doors, covered with light drapes, led out to a balcony that overlooked the paved streets. Daenara had often stayed here with Luseph on their visits. Now the room seemed foreign and empty. Beneath the blankets she bundled Deacon warm to her breast.

Downstairs the next morning the house was alive and buzzing with excitement. Thaemon’s two children were more than welcoming. In the kitchen Clara was preparing breakfast. It was a spacious, meticulously clean, and well organized kitchen; shelves lined the walls with large containers of spices and baskets filled with vegetables. The children had taken their place at the table, exerting all their energies on Deacon, who was entirely incommunicable. Brielle, like a little mother at two, commenced stroking his face and kissing his cheek in an officious, though well-intended manner, while Cedrik offered him a variety of good things to eat, as though he were a baby or some small animal.

While Deacon was engaged in timidly fending off the advances of his cousins, Thaemon took Daenara aside into his study. He frowned when he saw the strange burn mark round his sister’s wrist; it was as though a red-hot bracelet had seared the flesh.

“How did you come by this?” he asked, taking her wrist to examine it.

“His hand,” Daenara said, suppressing a shudder. “I could not tell you what shone in his eyes.”

“Daenara,” Thaemon said. “This is magic.” She nodded gravely, not understanding the full extent and nature of this calamity, but enough to consider Luseph had put himself and his family in serious danger. Uttering a vicious oath, Thaemon let her hand drop, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Tell me everything,” he said, slumping into his chair.

Daenara remained standing. She knew little, but told him what she could: that an odd man had come to the door of their home one morning, and that he brought a letter for Luseph. From the moment Luseph received it, he shut himself up in his room for days at a time, not so much as seeing the sun. He had become strange and secretive, and frightfully cold toward herself and Deacon. Then one evening when she ventured into his study he turned on her in sudden violence. She took Deacon from him the same night.

“It is an unnatural thing to steal a child away from his father,” said Daenara. “I know not if it is a crime I have committed, but there is no other means. We must not stay with him; Deacon must never breathe the atmosphere of that cursed house. It has been a burden to come here with this most unnatural misfortune. Whole days and nights I have considered what should be done, but there was nothing save confiding in you. Next to our mother you stand as my most faithful, truest friend.”

She had spoken with such nervous energy that now the false strength went from her utterly. She sank down into a chair and closed her eyes. Thaemon leaned forward, gently took her hand, and kissed it. Her tears overflowed, and she wept in silence for some minutes.

Thaemon watched her.

“Do you know what the letter was in relation to?” he questioned at last, “or who it was from?”

Daenara shook her head.

Thaemon insisted she stay with him until the matter was sorted. Gratefully, she consented, though she didn’t know what he meant by “sorting” the matter, and feared he didn’t know himself.

Chapter 2
A Shadow Of Doubt

The Imperial university of magic rose spire-like towards the sky. A pretentious structure, the most beautiful in the city, it contained the greatest collection of knowledge and power in all of Gonriel, being home to the council leaders, a group of twelve powerful mages who ruled the vast lands as they saw fit. There had been under their ruling peace for many years, and any conflict now seemed only to reside in the council itself. Travon, the arch mage, ever tightened his grip on the other members whether they willed it or not, gaining greater control and pushing heavily toward a dictatorship under his rule. It was not to be had.

Here Thaemon took his concern over Luseph. Crimes with the use of magic were punished harshly. He was not able to speak directly to the council members, but the steward of the guild told him the matter would be looked into. However, Thaemon got the impression they thought it a small priority. He would be left to safeguard his sister and her child from harm.

Settled in a bed next to Cedrik's, Deacon lay holding the hand of his mother, who was crouched down by the bedside. Through the dark he looked at her with uncertain eyes. "I don't want to stay here," he said in a hesitant voice, almost a plea. Daenara knew he wanted to go home.

"It will be all right," she said in a weak, comfortless tone, keeping her voice hushed, so as not to wake Cedrik sleeping untroubled. "It will be all right," she repeated to Deacon more confidently. The gentle pressure from his hand crushed her inside. He looked as if he dared not move, like a child frightened of the dark. "Go to sleep now," she said, brushing back the hair from his face, but his blue eyes stayed opened, wide and unhappy; they were asking her, waiting for her to make it all better. Leaning over, she kissed his solemn cheek and tasted a salt tear on her lips, whether his or her own, she could not tell.

The following days were quiet and uneventful, but Daenara had an irrepressible urge to take Deacon and run. She told herself she was anxious for no reason, that he could not hurt them here, but she began to suffer from vague, half-forgotten dreams that left her shaken. These dreams had even begun to haunt her in her waking hours, wisps of dark visions; smoke, blood, fire. Faceless men wailed in pain and agony. Deacon cried out for her.

After those frightful images Daenara woke with a sharp breath. In the dark she became conscious of a little form lying beside her. Sometime during the night Deacon had crept into bed with her, as he often did, whether for his own comfort or hers. Only half-awake, with his arm around her, clinging to her, Daenara felt the disconcerting sense of reversed roles; of him protecting her.

“You look tired,” came Rosa’s voice to Daenara the following day. Rosa was the daughter of Clara’s dearest friend. She had seen Daenara in the market district, pushed her way through the crowd, and came to walk at her side.

At this time of morning, the markets were flooded with people. They walked proudly and wore fine garments. As usual the city priest preached damnation at the front of the cathedral, which stood out brilliantly white in the morning sun. His dirty robes, barely more than rags, gave him more the appearance of a peasant or a drunkard than that of a holy priest.

“I do not sleep well,” said Daenara, partly distracted by the priest’s rantings. “I wish he would be quiet.”

Rosa was a tall girl and very slender. Her narrow face gave her a pixie appearance at times, and her hair looked lightning-scorched, yet it was becoming. She chewed on the side of her cheek, gathering an idea. Then she suddenly said, “You should try the hot springs. They are very relaxing. It’s what the elves bathe in, you know, all the minerals and such, very good for your skin. Or, you could go to the seer.”

“Where?”

“The seer,” Rosa repeated. “She can see your fate, but she is also a wonderful herbalist. She grows a variety of herbs just outside of the city. She is, shall I say, not an ordinary sort, but she is very good. My cousin Mertha once had a growth the size of a …well, let’s just say it wasn’t pleasant, and the herbal remedy did wonders for her. I’m certain she could give you something to help you sleep.”

“I will consider it.”

“No you won’t,” Rosa said, laughing. She kissed Daenara on the cheek and said, “Stay happy,” as she ran off to meet a group of giggling girls.

The afternoon sun set Daenara’s hair ablaze, revealing the red undertones in her warm brown hair. Undisturbed by her presence, grazing in the glade, were several placid deer and a fawn. Occasionally one would lift its head and return her gaze with docile brown eyes. The air was laden with the sweet scent of honeysuckle and spring wildflowers.

So bewitching was the sunshine and fragrance that she was freed of all troubling thoughts, and reminded of the brightness of day. Reclining on the grass, she watched with increasing joy as Deacon endeavored to catch flying insects. Not wanting the sensation to ever leave, she closed her eyes and let the feeling, along with the sunshine, sink deep into her as a kind of transfusion of warmth and life. She was not long here; then, the insidious creeping of dread came. Slowly, confusedly, she arose. She was suddenly fiercely alert. A horrid hush had befallen the woods. She was alone.

"Deacon," she called, trying to suppress the note of desperation. Repeatedly she called, her voice hollow and barely audible.

The whole world seemed to wheel round and round before coming to an abrupt halt. A black figure, standing on a small rise, silhouetted by the glare of the sun, she painfully recognized as Luseph. Deacon lay peacefully in his arms.

Stepping forward, she stumbled and fell. Pushing herself partly up, she saw that Luseph was gone. She gasped as a voice from behind came so near she could feel the hot breath on her ear.

“You cannot keep him from me!” Turning, she stared up at Luseph. His expression surprised her, for instead of hate there was grief. This was Luseph as she had known him.

“Luseph,” she whimpered, penitent. His face turned cold; accusing eyes pierced her in a thousand places; and she found she was deprived of the strength to stand. He would take Deacon from her. “Give him to me,” she said nervously, stretching forth her hand.

Luseph made no attempt to catch her, and she fell piteously into the cold, damp earth. Weeping in frustration, she tore at the grass. Her bowed form was shaken by the violence of her emotion.

Pain turned to fear as she raised her tear-stained face to find her husband gone and in his place a stranger. He was thin, draped in black robes, his black hair smoothed back from a stern brow. He peered down at her with eyes she had never before seen in a living man, glazed and icy, revealing nothing of a soul within, yet he seemed to burn with some intense enthusiasm, or, it could be with hate.

“Listen to what I have to say.” His voice was frightening in its lack of resonance. With a purposeful movement, he reached forward a pale hand. In abject fear and defiance, Daenara scrambled back from him, shaking her head. He paused and clasped his hands passively in front of him, yet there was something deeply threatening, deeply alarming in his forbearance.

His face, at once unfamiliar yet familiar, seemed terrible. Suddenly his eyes flared like blue lightning, and Daenara felt an intense heat ignite across her skin, causing a burning in her body which she felt would set her on fire, but it was the man who suddenly combusted into a blaze of vivid flames. She saw he was shocked and in terrible pain as his flesh was slowly consumed while he was still standing upon his feet. In desperation, mingled with some horrifying attempt toward affection, he staggered toward her, clutching at her, trying to draw her into him. She screamed. He would draw her into the flames and she would be burned alive with him. Frantically she tried to crawl away, but she was held.

In her utterly wretched state, Daenara cried out to Luseph for him to help her, but he did not come. She wondered with alarm if he could not hear her screams or whether he had left her to wallow in pain and misery.

Daenara awoke to darkness, with a vague pain as if she had really been seared. She was momentarily disorientated. A sly wind blew the curtains, and for an instant, she thought she saw a dark form hidden behind the light folds. But it was only momentary.

Close at her side a small voice mumbled indistinctly. As her thought and vision cleared, she saw Deacon at her bedside, his face dark and blurred with sleep. With trembling hands she reached out for him to come to her. Rubbing the hair from his eyes, he crawled into bed beside her. She clung to him, rocking him, and murmuring almost fiercely, “He cannot have you.”

Much later, when she was certain Deacon was asleep, she carefully slid her arm out from underneath him. She went out onto the balcony. The cool brush of night air was at once calming. Down below she could see the city guards patrolling the streets. She recalled how her home village and surrounding fields would be engulfed in darkness at night. Here, where it was always bright and always awake, she felt some sense of security. It was here she had first met Luseph, but he had been anxious to move away to someplace quiet, and so before Deacon was born they went to a small village, and were happy. A dark shadow of doubt loomed before Daenara. Staying at her brother’s home indefinitely was not an option, nor was going home.

Chapter 3
Intrusion

Janet, an old friend of the family, discovered that Daenara had returned, and was anxious to see her. She wished to give Daenara her former job at the book emporium, and extended an invitation for her to dine at the elven gardens, where Janet resided. Although Daenara was hesitant at the idea of leaving Deacon—the old woman had requested she not bring the child—she was very keen to take back her position and accepted the invitation.

However, that very same day, Daenara had been troubled by dark images; every sound seemed to set her on edge like a sensitive, care-worn nerve. She attributed this anxiousness to lack of sleep and so decided, against her better judgment, to take Rosa's advice and visit the seer.

Daenara left Deacon at her brother's—she would trust him to no one else—and took a walk outside the city gates. By the river little bugs hovered over wildflowers. Ripples every now and then appeared on the surface, as fish took snaps at them. Lara Gully, a tiny slip of a woman, barely taller than her eldest child, was out gathering blossoms. Her horde of children, scattered at the riverside, created a beastly amount of noise, slapping at the water as they tried to catch fish. As Daenara paused to watch, she felt an ache of longing.

Lara's house was further down the road, but she often came up near the city gates to speak with the guards. Kahn, the broadest and possibly most dim-witted of all the guards, received most of her attention. He had a broad grin on his face as he watched her. Occasionally she would stop to yell at the children splashing about too wildly. When they had ignored her for the last time, she hitched up her dress, much to Kahn's delight, and went into the water to drag them out by the scruffs of their necks.

She received little help from her husband, a brutish sort of man, who lived at the tavern more than he did at home. Lara didn't seem to mind, but

then half of her children belonged to Kahn. Everyone but her husband seemed to know this.

Despite the commotion, sheep grazed lazily, along with several fat brown hens. They went flying in a mad fluster when Daenara walked through. To the far left of the gates was a small beaten path, which Rosa had instructed her to take. It led Daenara into a part of the woods that a shadow hung over even in the daytime.

Here was a tall, dark house, a lonesome, bodiless thing that seemed slightly crooked in structure, having a leaning appearance that if looked at for too long gave a sensation of light-headedness. It was not because the earth beneath was unstable, but because the wood itself seemed to bend and groan with life of its own. Greenish-grey smoke billowed out of the motley stone chimney, and filled the air with mysterious spices.

Daenara stepped up to the long, secretive-looking door; she raised a hand to knock, but the door opened of its own accord as if pulled by an unseen hand. The hall was dark, lit only by a single candle. A strange wind, as soft as it was foreboding, swept along the polished wood floor and rushed through her skirt. At this moment she lost courage and turned to leave, when sweeping out from a side room came a beautiful olive-complexioned woman. She wore a long billowy dress the colour of pale blue ice. It fell from her slender shoulders most exquisitely. Her dark hair was lit with highlights, as if the silver moon perpetually shone down upon it.

“Welcome,” she said, her voice vacant and distant, as if it rose from the depths of water, like a spirit from the sea. She slowly turned, as if having no sense of time, and led Daenara through to a large room, which would have been horribly dark if it had not been lit by a brilliant fire in the hearth. It had a strange mingling of old and elaborate furnishings from many different lands: fraying rugs, stone jars and mortars, quaint and ornate chests, and mysterious dark bureaus.

With a fluid gesture, the seer offered her guest a seat. In a leisurely manner she unhooked the kettle from the fire and poured a cup of tea. Each and every movement was precise and deliberate.

Once seated, the seer finally looked at Daenara, making her shift uncomfortably. There was something intensely mystical about the smoky, heavy-lidded eyes and full dark lips of the seer. The seer had an indiscernible expression but then inhaled deeply. A sudden twitch in her neck gave an odd contrast with her earlier fluidity.

She spoke in a deeper voice than she had previously, far more commanding. “What is it that you seek?”

Uncomfortable with the entire situation, Daenara said, “I want only to purchase some herbs …to help me sleep.”

The seer, with those shadowy eyes, looked at Daenara, probing and searching. “There is a veil over your mind,” she said, “something hidden.”

It was then Daenara decided to make the most of her visit and stammered, “I have been having dreams. They come to me more like visions. I want to understand them.”

The seer seemed to liven at this prospect, and she produced a small, sharp knife that had been tucked away somewhere in her dainty bosom. “Give me your hand.” Daenara shrank back, protectively holding her hand as if it had already been stuck. “You may command me only to the extent in which you are willing to obey me. Now give me your hand.”

The softness in her expression redeemed her sharpness, and Daenara felt compelled to obey. Squeezing shut her eyes, she held out her palm, waiting for the pain, but she felt nothing more than a little sting on the fingertip. When she reopened her eyes, a pinprick of blood showed on the tip of her finger. The seer placed a drop of it in the tea and swirled, taking care not to spill any. Then she downed the concoction.

Her eyes instantly rolled upward, and her lids fluttered closed. Daenara waited nervously as the seer’s eyes darted under their lids, back and forth, as if she was dreaming. Then the seer spoke. “You run from something.” There was that strange tic again. She remained in her altered state as though searching through thoughts and memories. “A man robed in black. You feel

his presence only in the blackest recesses of your mind. A man with eyes of blue flame."

Here the fire went dark in the hearth as if suddenly snuffed out by the breath of her words. Everything in the room seemed to shift, as thin light from the narrow window took over as the only source of light, and Daenara suddenly felt several presences in the room. They crowded round her; she felt them brush against her skin like a breath of ice wind. In voices that seemed nowhere and everywhere, they murmured indistinctly, but their tone conveyed fear and awe.

Daenara rose sharply to leave, but a strong hand took her wrist. The seer held her fast.

"The man you love—and the man you fear—are one and the same, and he is dark—dark and terrible. He knows the dead, and the dead know him," whispered the seer, as if she spoke from deep under water, which she could not rise above. Daenara was afraid. She knew that the seer was using a form of necromancy and that it was an illegal practice. Slowly the shadowy eyes fluttered open, and Daenara felt the strange presences slowly disperse, fading back into the walls, dark corners, and shadows. The air was once again empty.

"I have something for you," said the seer in her usual voice. She released Daenara and went into a back room. Daenara waited, holding her wrist. She glanced round the room, fearful anything spectral should come out from its hiding place.

In a moment, the seer returned, carrying two neatly wrapped tiny packages. She offered one first. "This is to help relax you. Drink it before you sleep at night." Then she placed the second package in Daenara's hand. "This is used for strong warding spells. Place it in front of your door, and no one who means you harm shall be able to enter." Daenara nodded wordlessly. For a moment she thought she saw fear in the seer's eyes.

Once she was outside, the world seemed normal again. Daenara felt as though she had come out of some strange dream. The further down the path she walked, the better she felt. The air was alive with the trilling of birds,

busy in their daily activities. Soon she could see the city walls and Lara with her children. The sight was welcoming, and Daenara hastened her step, anxious to be home.

The whole experience left her sufficiently shaken that she cancelled her prior engagement to dine with Janet. After several days passed with nothing eventful occurring, Daenara began to relax again. She had been faithfully taking the herbal remedy and at night slept well. A rose was returning to her cheek. Janet noticed this over the passing days and again extended the invitation. Rosa had the long and tiring task of convincing Daenara to go, repeatedly reassuring her.

“Even the wisest among us must be wrong sometimes.” Rose smiled as she spoke. “My mother was once told by a seer that she would come into the fond company of a singularly handsome man and would be betrothed at once.” Daenara stared blankly, not understanding. “She married my father two days later.” The last response drew a slight smile from Daenara, as she thought of the short, round baker, who, though tenderhearted, was hardly singularly handsome.

After much persuasion Daenara agreed to go to the dinner. Dressed in an elegant evening gown, her hair pinned up simply and gracefully, she gathered Deacon into her arms for the last kiss of the evening.

He was a little hesitant and distant with his mother, being unaccustomed to seeing her done up so extravagantly, and her perfume, a pungent scent of wildflowers, was unfamiliar to him. It had been a gift from Rosa. Clara took him from Daenara’s arms, trying to offer him sweets as a consolation for giving up his mother for the evening, but he flatly refused. His attention set greater value on what his mother was up to.

The door closed behind Daenara, shutting out the light and Deacon. She could hear Clara speaking reassuringly to him. Daenara hated leaving him. She felt as though she was abandoning him. In her hand she clasped the pouch of warding herbs. Gathering her dress round her legs, she squatted down at the doorway, and taking a handful of the herbs, sprinkled them across the threshold. As she did so she caught, out of the corner of her eye, a guard staring at her with an odd look of bemusement on his face. Slowly,

he turned his head aside, feigning disinterest in her peculiar behavior. Hurriedly she stood and surreptitiously placed the pouch in a geranium pot.

Her shoes clicked on the cobbled stones, as she made her way to the gates of the elven gardens. Two guards were posted there. Slipping them a piece of parchment that allowed her entry, she waited nervously as the large, heavy doors were cranked open. Once inside, Daenara could hardly believe only a single stone wall separated the city from this ethereal Eden. There were so many intricate hidden paths and steps that led to secret little haunts of wonder and enchantment that to look for someone here would be like playing hide-and-seek.

Evening tranquility had settled over the gardens, inviting Daenara to stroll awhile. A hushed sense of peace and harmony came over her as she drifted through an archway of marble pillars, roofed by pale blue flowers, that cascaded like a fragrant waterfall.

Laced throughout the gardens were stone and timber homes that, while somewhat humanized, were endowed with refined elven characteristics. Hidden pathways led to private courtyards, and blossoms cascaded over balconies and silver railings—their sweet scent lingering in the still evening air. Little white flowers that looked like bells arranged up a delicate stem graced the edge of a majestic pond with water flowing down from smooth rocks. The elves believed water should always be living and never allowed to stagnate.

Finally Daenara arrived at Janet’s immaculate dwelling. It was charming and elegant. Growing up the walls were thick, woody tendrils, adorning the stone with purple, pendulous blossoms. In the front door were two long narrow windows, with ornate wrought iron climbing up the glass like flowering vines. An exceedingly well-dressed man, with a stiff neck and proud tilt of his head, admitted Daenara with a rehearsed greeting.

Inside was not quite what she had expected. It was a fine home, the sort anyone should be proud of, furnished with deep colored woods and rich reds, but she had somehow expected it to be more elvish and less human. Being in such a stately home, Daenara felt an uneasiness and a need to put on a certain pretense of propriety. Quietly she walked down the hall,

observing the elaborate hanging tapestries. Through a large archway, she saw into the dining alcove. A long table was set elegantly for two. She was on the verge of clearing her throat when Janet came sweeping out from the kitchen. In her hands she carried a long, silver platter, upon which was a succulent cut of meat on a bed of fragrant herbs.

The elderly, prominently-featured woman greeted Daenara with keen pleasure. She had silvery hair, like finespun cobweb, taken up into a becoming roll and fastened with a pretty jewel. Apart from the servants, Janet was all alone in the big house and was happy to have company. She enjoyed being the hostess, pouring out wine and serving dinner in a well-bred manner. The evening progressed delightfully, but Daenara was persistently distracted by strange, intangible feelings that made her grow restless.

Back at the house Clara sat in the dwelling-room, quietly knitting. Thaemon had put the children to bed and had just sat down in his favorite chair with a cup of bitter coffee when a sharp knock was heard at the front door. Thaemon had barely opened it when a group of men barged their way through as though they were expected. At the unexpected intrusion, Clara stood with a sharp exclamation of surprise.

The men were all dressed in matching robes and equipped with swords. Thaemon immediately identified them as Imperial Guardians, an elite group of magic-users, also trained in the use of weapons. They were utilized by the council to enforce laws and investigate crimes related to magic. Pulling his wife protectively to his side, Thaemon asked, “What is the meaning of all this?”

He directed his demand at the tall man with shoulders squared in a militant posture, who appeared to be the commander of the group. His name was Aéoden. He approached Thaemon with the same patronizing politeness he would a regular civilian, while several of the other men dashed upstairs.

“My children are up there!” Thaemon said, starting forward, but his path was barred. Frustrated and helpless, he returned to his wife’s side. She looked at him with a pleading expression, for him to do something, but he was as helpless as she.

Janet was chattering away happily, not yet realizing her words were unheard. A strong feeling had possessed Daenara, as if something terrible were taking place. “Are you all right, dear?” Janet inquired, pouring wine from a silver carafe. Daenara rose from her seat in a feverish manner. Hurriedly, she thanked her hostess for the lovely evening, and insisting she was not feeling well, excused herself. Full of an intangible fear that something evil was about to befall her son, Daenara began to run.

At the house, it was not long before the men came downstairs and stated that the child was gone. Thaemon’s face darkened, and he suddenly tore up the stairs, with such a fierceness it would have taken several men to stop him if they had tried. Bursting into Cedrik’s room, he felt his heart stand still. He saw that Deacon’s bed was empty. Cedrik stood, dazed and afraid, in the middle of the room. Without a beat missed, Thaemon collected up his son, then his daughter too, who had wandered into the hallway, abruptly awakened.

When Thaemon had placed his children in the care of their mother, he accosted Aéoden, and demanded the situation be explained. Here the front door suddenly flung open, and Daenara flew hectically inside. She stopped dead. She was surrounded by strangers and saw Clara huddled up with only two children. Thaemon stood at her side looking tortured. Daenara felt the hot blood rush to her head and rapidly drain again and would have collapsed if not for the strong arms of the guard who stood nearest.

Chapter 4
The Quest

A cup of tea was untouched, growing cold at Daenara's elbow. She sat listlessly, with spent grief. Her brother, crouched down by her legs, had a pained expression of failure and anguish. After some standard comforting words, and a solemn promise that her son would be retrieved, Aéoden and his men were making their exit when Daenara unexpectedly caught their attention with a sharp intake of breath. An expression of shock struck her features, as if she stared at something only her eyes had power to see. Thaemon clutched her hand, his fretful words lost. Presently her eyes, veiled with tears, blinked back from vacancy and turned sharply upon him.

"I saw him," she said. Her face drained of colour and in a quivering voice, she went on to describe the structure and surrounding area in her vision.

"Cheviot Priory," one of the men said. "That's in Terroni, south of here."

The men had all appeared the same to Daenara when she first set frantic eyes upon them, but she saw now this one was different. He was tall and slender, with fair hair that was rather long, a graceful mouth, and a strangely delicate completion that a woman might envy. But there was a greater difference in him even than his lighter skin and finer features. There was a distinct difference in his bearing and movements, a graceful efficiency. When he turned his eyes on Daenara, she faltered to see how blue they were and how exceedingly clear. She could not mistake he was elven, and heard him addressed as Éomus.

Another man close to Aéoden, in terms of rank, suggested they should bring her along, with the explanation she could be useful in their efforts, considering her ability and close association to the innocent. Aéoden, after musing a moment, addressed Daenara directly. "Are you certain of what

you saw?” She nodded but was in a great deal of confusion, having little knowledge in the ways of magic. “Your vision, can you determine present or future?”

“No.”

“It’s all right.” Aéoden turned to one of his men. “If what she saw was accurate,” he said hesitantly, uncertain as to whether he was dealing with a gifted woman or a distraught mother; “then it means he’s most likely still in that region. He won’t risk evanescing again. Go quickly, then return and tell me what you discover.”

The man, like vanishing wind, was gone from their sight. Aéoden stood waiting, without any betrayal of anxious anticipation. He was, however, anxious, knowing it was risky for his friend to evanesce alone. It was impossible to know who might sense the location of the individual transporting. After many minutes the man returned. Unfortunately he hadn’t encountered the necromancer believed responsible so was not able to intercept him. There were, however, sufficient signs to know Daenara had been accurate, and he informed Aéoden the necromancer had continued on further south.

They started that same night. Daenara was given her own horse and could ride well. She was quiet and obedient and did not prove to be a taxing addition to their party. Her visions, which seemed to have lain dormant most of her life, would force themselves on her at will and often were hazy and abstract, so that she could not clearly see the underlying meaning. She was by degrees learning to leave herself receptive to them, and was able to focus with greater clarity on the images before her. She seemed open to every psychic breeze, and felt the effect of every wind upon her. At times she had to shut her mind or the visions would drive her mad.

By the emergence of the pale crest of the moon, a camp had been set up. The men were all very proficient and went about their business effectively, leaving Daenara to stand about without offering much assistance. Very soon a fire was made, and a hot meal was had virtually in silence. Daenara’s gaze was fixed on the dancing flame. Without her husband, without her child, the

sense of loss was heavy on her. Infrequently she lifted her gaze to pass across the brave men who would reunite her with her son.

There was another besides the Elf who stood out plainly against the rest. He was a ghastly looking man and wore dark robes very different from the others, without the addition of armour or weapons. His skin was sallow and sickly. She would have felt sorry for this emaciated husk of a man if not for the evil that pervaded him. She could detect the hollowness of his nature at once and wondered why he would be on this assignment. He stood in private counsel with Thedred, the man who had first suggested Daenara come along.

“There is a veil over her mind,” said Goran, incapable of speaking above a whisper. “I cannot read her. Someone, might we guess who, has placed a very good ward upon her mind. However, her fortunate ability and her relation to the child suggests quite plainly she is indeed of Riven blood.”

“Perhaps you should make certain,” Thedred said. His attitude was that of a man who had a dreadful task but reluctantly accepted it as a necessary evil.

Daenara found it difficult to refrain from shuddering when Goran’s attention turned upon her, forcing her to avert her eyes.

“What is it that keeps you two muttering over there?” Aéoden asked with a touch of reproach, noting that their secretiveness bothered the woman. The two men had evidently finished their counsel and after their addresser’s reproof, rejoined the camp. Thedred had the look of one deeply troubled, which in turn troubled Daenara. She wondered what they were keeping from her.

“Do not surrender yourself to despair,” came a quiet voice, with a pure and graceful accent. Having seen she was distressed, Éomus took a seat at her side. He did not place a hand on her, but his very presence was caressive and soothing. “So long as this ill fate befalls you, we shall be at your side.” His gracious words were full of authority. His eyes held hers with sincere affection. Éomus was eminently handsome, every feature graced by purity

and knowledge. His eyes were strange and beautiful, and something besides the moon lit them. Elven eyes are transparent, and what one truly sees in them is the light of their soul.

“Will no one explain to me what my son’s place is in all of this?” Daenara finally asked quietly.

“Deacon is a Riven,” Aéoden said. “Were you aware?”

“No. I don’t understand.”

“Rivens are a feared race, although mostly considered non-existent now, being so few in number. They’re an ensorcelled race, prone to magical abilities, much like yourself. We originally supposed that it was Luseph himself that was Riven, but I suspect now perhaps it is you that provides the blood that flows through your son’s veins.”

“It is because of this he was taken?” Daenara asked, having no idea she and her son were of this particular race. She suspected it was her elusive father whom should be thanked for this unknown and unique heritage. “Why did he not take me instead?”

“There are many reasons,” said Aéoden; “Your mind might make the process that he intends more difficult than needs be. Perhaps the blood they need for their black ritual must be male. There are too many considerations to mention.”

“His blood?” Daenara said with alarm. “Do they mean to take his life?” Aéoden gave her an uncertain look, and her face became pale as death. She could feel the fear enveloping her like a noxious atmosphere, taking all her air, suffocating her.

“I know too little in the ways of necromancy to say,” said Aéoden, with a sobriety that did not ease any of her fears.

“It shall not come to that,” said Éomus, who had been quietly sitting at her side all the while with a grieved expression.

“Luseph would never let them …” she said but could not finish, striving to stifle herself with her hand, which was covering her mouth.

“There is time yet,” said Goran irritably. “Luseph must wait for his masters to deem the correct moment, before he proceeds. Our knowledge of their attempt was the only thing that forced them into sooner action, and not all blood rituals involve death. It is a delicate process. I assure you he will await his moment.”

Daenara kept herself as collected as possible, so that she might further be informed. “And what does he hope to gain by this?”

Aéoden drew breath as though he had much to say. “Luseph was a scholar of magic at the university, and a former Guardian, years ago; I knew him well. His whole life was devoted to necromancy. He would shut himself up in his room for days and afterwards would be strange.

“He spoke of disembodied voices that would speak to him incessantly, making him peculiar and unapproachable; which probably explains why he left the order. When the arch mage suddenly banned necromancy, for reasons we were never told, Luseph was ruined. He had returned to his room and everything, everything down to the last scrap of parchment, had been taken and burned. His life’s work all gone. He, along with many other necromancers, left the university. It was rumoured they relocated somewhere hidden so they could continue their studies, and even more disturbing rumours were that they had a plan to overthrow Travon. They hadn’t been taken seriously until a source came to us, and we were informed they had discovered a Riven.”

Aéoden remained quiet and allowed Daenara to process all that he was telling her. “I still don’t understand; how is Deacon to help them?” she asked with an impatience induced by fear.

“Riven blood contains certain imbuing qualities,” said Aéoden. “And it is our belief they will be using this trait to restore a man who was long ago vanquished from this earth, a man who is the embodiment of purgatory. He could be vanquished but not killed. For many years he has been incarcerated in a city that burns eternally. Travon bound his power so that

he could never escape, but if his strength was to be restored, he could break bounds and be brought back into existence. He would kill Travon."

Late that night Daenara lay alone in her tent, her mind in turmoil. She had been bereaved when she had left Luseph, as if she had lost him to death, for the man she once knew no longer existed. Now upon hearing all Aéoden said, she began to doubt whether she had ever really known him. She had always depended on Luseph to have the strong arms that would protect her. Now, not only was she without his comforting embrace, but he was in fact the hand against her. Any remorse or fear of doing him an injustice vanished. The feeling of isolation overcame her, and she began to weep. The surrounding darkness seemed to be inhaled with every sob, till she felt she would drown in darkness.

Chapter 5
Quest Continues

Daenara's mind was impregnable, Goran had discovered irritably. Without her knowledge he tried on several occasions to break the barriers and find the true source of her ability, but the protection charm was impervious. Goran thought Luseph had put the concealing spell on her, but it had been done by a man with whom he was entirely unfamiliar. When she was first born, before her father left, he had given her this single parting gift, as much for her protection as his own. It was not good for Rivens to make their presence known in a world that was against them.

After his many failed attempts, Goran believed he was weakened because he was already convinced of her heritage and wasn't using enough effort, but then his determination not to be outdone by a charm made him exert all his efforts, and still he failed. He had become so put-out that he almost decided to simply lie to Thedred, who had been so insistent that he know for certain.

Thedred was a good man, but had almost a fanatical devotion to the arch mage. He would do Travon's bidding in the good faith that Travon knew what was best for the collective masses. The individual did not matter. Gonriel's great lands were proof of Travon's competence. Thedred was, however, considerably uncomfortable with the task he had been assigned. He quailed inwardly when he thought of it. He had been instructed to dispense with both mother and child. The arch mage was determined to wipe out every last Riven that walked the earth.

The sky was bright and clear. The spring weather had began to grow pleasantly warm. The land was open around them with green rolling meadows, and the sun shone bright upon them, but the sun could not warm Daenara's face. Leading their horses by foot, the travellers slackened their pace a moment for brief repose. Éomus led his beautiful white horse by

Daenara's sturdy brown mount. Neither said a word to one another, but Éomus's presence was always a great comfort.

Behind Daenara, several horses back, Goran's sallow eyes were fixed intently on her with an expression of sheer determination. Goran had come very near to giving up, when at last he broke through. He had done so, so unexpectedly that he gasped when he suddenly came upon the intimate recesses of her mind—seeing images and memories that flicked through his own mind in rapid succession. The memories were all, of course, useless to him, and he pushed them aside irritably. They were not what he needed to see.

Feeling a sharp pain, Daenara suddenly clutched her head. He hadn't been in her mind long, but long enough to gain the information he needed. The subconscious mind holds a vast resource of knowledge. It knows intimately the nature of one's own being, down to the very last cell. Rivens' magical energies are interwoven with the lifeforce that infuses each and every one of their cells. It is the source of their strength, which is why mages of other races simply cannot muster the same power and energy levels of which a Riven is capable.

When the sudden headache had passed, Daenara glanced back at Goran as though she sensed he had been tampering with her. His gaze remained flat and arrogant, though his mouth slowly peeled back into something akin to a smile. A sickening sensation grew in her stomach; the sight of him always left her with a feeling of abhorrence. She turned her eyes front again and saw Éomus was looking at her. His expressions were so subtle it was often difficult to determine what he was thinking, but always did he look on her with kindness, and he took pains to make certain she was comfortable.

"Are you well?" asked Éomus, seeing that her complexion had waned. She nodded wordlessly, her gaze directed upward as though she were listening. The breeze carried dull and mournful moans that resolved themselves into wails and shrill cries. They were faint and barely audible, as though heard from a great distance. Daenara did not know any animal that could have produced such chilling, torture-laden wails.

She had heard them periodically over the past days, but mostly felt them. The men had said nothing, and she wasn't certain if they even heard them or whether it was in her mind. "Something comes for us," she said to Éomus, fearfully. "I don't know what it is—but it comes to us with malice."

"Wreavers. They have been tracking us for days."

"Wreavers?" she asked, responding to the concern she felt within Éomus.

"Necromantic monsters," said one of the Guardians, with a look of loathing. "They walk like men, but they're soulless beasts, brutal and mindless. A single scratch is all that is required to spread their vile poison coursing through your body. Even the meanest among us could not bear the pain. Men have been known to cut their own throats to escape it."

Later that afternoon, by a cool stream, the travelling party wet their lips and rested on its grassy banks. Daenara crouched down by Aéoden who was washing his hot-red face. "Who is that man?" she asked him quietly, looking at the sickly man who drank from a water bag painfully slowly, not taking more than the most meagre sips.

"Goran." Aéoden almost spat. "He's one of the necromancers that stayed true to Travon, or rather feared to go against him. Now he sets his talents on worming his way into people's minds like the treacherous little maggot he is. Both mind manipulation and prying are illegal practises, except when we utilize them for investigation. He's often very useful, which is why that unfortunate creature accompanies us. Should he bother you, tell me, and I will see that he repents it."

Aéoden continued to wash his face and neck, drenching his hair entirely. Daenara rose to her feet. "It's growing warmer," she said. A soft wind brushed her face and softened her strained features.

"It's going to become more so," Aéoden told her. "The tracks we've been following have persistently led south toward the Surian desert.

“No,” Daenara corrected with such blatancy as to cause Aéoden to pause midway and look up at her with curiosity. Wiping the water from his eyes he rose to full height, looking at her. “I see snow,” she said absently, her eyes lightly closed. “Mountains laden with snow and frost—and rising taller than the rest, a great mountain, and a dark structure obscured in its mists.”

Aéoden rubbed his brow frustratedly. “Are you certain?” Without waiting for a response, he said, addressing no one in particular, “We have been deceived; we are going the wrong way.” He impatiently took the reins of his horse.

He had come to trust Daenara’s visions. She had warned him of dangers and guided him and the men safely through unknown and treacherous terrain. They had been deceived; the tracks had been false. Necromancers have many deceiving powers, such as illusion, and can make things appear as they are not, even to a trained eye.

“Let us proceed now. We have lost too much time.” Aéoden said.

“In which direction are we to go?” asked one of the men.

“The only mountains to have snow this time of year are in the realm of Illésmore,” said Éomus, assisting Daenara to mount.

Aéoden nodded. “We go north,” he said, settling himself in the saddle. In an attempt to make up for lost time, they had not taken a break in many hours and rode into the night over dark fields with only the stars to light their path. They eventually set up camp in a dark wood. An unfortunate boar on a spit had become dinner for the evening. As she partook of something to eat, Daenara found her attention again drawn to Goran and Thedred, even though the two now sat apart and seemed to speak little.

Goran had lost interest in her entirely, while Thedred had his eyes always upon her—always with the same dreadful look of remorse—eyes always slightly averted as though he could not bear her gaze. His face was heavy with some burden. His haunted glances made her deeply uncomfortable. He, at times, gave her the feeling he wanted to get her alone

with him, where she would not have the safety of the other men. His strange attitude pressed against her already weary soul and made Daenara feel as though she would wilt with the pain of it. Her arms ached to hold Deacon, to feel his warm little body against her own. She feared that he was afraid and alone.

Not far from Daenara, another's heart was aching for hers and had a great desire to soothe her. He stood with his shoulder against a tall tree, never far from her. He settled kind, pale eyes on her with grave interest. He could see that she grew paler and fainter with each passing day, but the absence of bloom on her cheek did not diminish her beauty in Éomus's eyes. Her loveliness was of the earth, warm and natural. The soft glow of the fire touched her face, bringing warmth back into it.

Presently, a hand gently rested on Daenara's shoulder. It was the whitest as well as the lightest ever to have been laid on her. She looked up into the face of Éomus. He smiled down on her with the look of promised alleviation, and she felt herself soften at his touch.

"This will all soon be at an end," he said, and the calm intensity of his voice held her with a sense of assurance. "You will again, very soon, behold him and take him into your arms. This is all just a terrible dream from which you are soon to wake." A deep frown creased his otherwise smooth brow. "I pledge my life on it." The moment he removed himself from her side, it was as though a light had been extinguished, leaving her in darkness.

Later, when the men were settling into their tents, Daenara noticed Éomus vanished deeper into the woods as quietly as the breeze passing. She had in fact noticed that every evening, wherever they might be, Éomus would silently steal away to be on his own for a time. She followed him this evening, treading softly through the moonlit trees. The soft sound of rushing water came to her ear and led her to where water flowed down from rocks and collected in a pool of shimmering water. Éomus stood at its edge. The moonlight outlined his slim well-proportioned figure.

She could hear him speaking softly in a language that was of the earth, the trees, and the wind. The words flowed from his graceful lips reverently

as though in prayer, though his face was not down-bent but raised to the night sky. His luminous features were smooth without any sign of care. The meaning of his words eluded her but were nevertheless healing. Without making her presence known, she listened long to him. Her face rested upon her hand as she leaned against a tree. The lilting, melodious words filled her with a deep sense of calm.

“Does it bring you comfort?” he asked quietly. The unexpected address brought her back with a slight start. She believed that the trees must whisper to him, for she fancied she had made no sound. Yet still he knew she was there.

“Yes,” she said in a half-whisper, feeling somewhat ashamed. It was after all his personal moment. Perhaps he wished to keep it for himself, but his expression when he turned toward her was of pure tenderness.

“It is an invocation requesting strength and guidance,” he said.

Amid this deep quiet Daenara felt an unspeakable anguish arise within her heart. Until now she had borne the despair with unfaltering courage. Tears gathered in her eyes. “I cannot let my son die.” Her voice was scarcely a whisper.

“It will not be a grief you will have to bear,” he soothed. He extended a slender hand toward her. “Come to me.”

The moment her hand was laid in his, she was drawn gently into his embrace. Not the finest silks nor satins could compare to the feel of his touch. Caressing her lovely hair, words were spoken from his lips in a melodious tongue. Daenara looked into the pale eyes with their unfathomable depths and felt a hushed sense of peace. Éomus lowered his face and let his words fall on her lips, kissing her deeply as if he meant to take upon himself all of her sorrow. In the moonlight they stood serenely radiant, with their heads bent together.

Chapter 6
Luseph

Far in the northern lands of Gonriel, a bitter everlasting winter had gripped the lands. It was a wild and formidable terrain, with harsh winds and jagged mountains, covered in frost and snow, peeking up through thick fog. Rising from this cluster of mountains was an isolated mountain, on whose summit was a dark spire-like temple. Within that terrible structure things half-living, half-dead, and entirely unholy, walked its halls.

Luseph's study was a large, comfortable room, where rows of books, thickly bound in leather, lined an impressive case. Thick rugs were splayed across the stone floors, along with richly carved furniture that carried with them a forlorn smell of things ancient and forgotten. Luseph stood by a fire that burned steadily in a gaping fireplace, with his hands clasped behind his back. He was dressed in fine black robes, with a high stiff collar that fit tightly and neatly against his white throat. A man with cunning eyes came to stand at his side.

"You did not bring his mother," Luseph said, in a tone that did not seek to disguise his displeasure.

"It turned out to be an impossible task. And my first priority was the boy, as you instructed," he reminded Luseph with a shade of patronization, which quickly died as the latter turned on him. For a moment the man was uncertain, but Luseph's attention was soon drawn to the small boy curled fast asleep in a leather chair.

For a long time he looked at Deacon. No expression of tenderness showed on his features, yet still he looked, as one might look on a precious item. Presently, Deacon awoke from this unnatural slumber and seemed afraid. Luseph stepped forward. He knew Deacon looked on him without recognition; his face was hardly his own. The sleepless nights and strange dealings with the dead, had all sufficed to dissolve any likeness to his former self.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Luseph and beckoned the trembling and bewildered child get down and come to him, but Deacon shrank away. Luseph did not endeavour to comfort him but knelt down, placing a hand on each armrest either side of him, as though to box in the fretful little fox. “Do you know me?” he repeated. His eyes shone like moonlit ice.

Deacon recoiled against the backrest as though he could sink into it and escape.

“I’ll tell you now. You are my son, and you are going to assist in making the world a grand place.” Rising to his feet, Luseph lifted Deacon from his seat and set him down. “Let me look at you,” he said, taking a seat and drawing Deacon to stand before him. Gently, he pushed back the dark hair from the sullen face, and the blue eyes, timid and wet, lifted to examine the examiner.

“Do you still not know me?” Luseph asked in a softer tone, and taking the little hand in his own, placed it to his cheek, all the while looking intently into Deacon’s face to detect any sign of recognition. There was none. And Deacon again began to grow fretful. Luseph rose sharply, letting Deacon’s hand drop as though he had lost all interest in his existence. He moved to the window, where he stood, silent, with his back towards them.

“Shall I have him placed somewhere for the time being?” asked the man.

“No. He stays with me,” Luseph said, in a way that left no room for discussion. With a slight incline of his head the man left father and child alone. Deacon retreated to the leather chair. A prepared tray of food had been set on a side table. At his heavy writing table Luseph sat silent in his deep seriousness. Fixed intently on nothing, his grey eyes looked frozen, directed at his son. The only sign that his mind was working was the slow rubbing of his fingers. From under bent brows he could see that Deacon trembled.

Though he appeared indifferent and was cold, very cold, Luseph was not bad-tempered toward the child, and the child was not ill-natured. However, under the circumstances, Deacon kept Luesph in a constant state

of disquiet, refusing to eat and fretting for his mother. In his worked-up state he often used a form of speech that was mostly incomprehensible to Luseph, which frequently resulted in one cursing and the other crying.

Forsaking his chair Deacon uttered a teary and miserable appeal to see his mother. Luseph pinched the bridge of his nose. Since Deacon had awakened he had proved a tiresome creature. “Cease whining!” Luseph said with an impatience amounting nearly to anger. His outburst subdued, but did not cease, Deacon’s misery; the brave little chest heaved a dignifying sigh. Coming to crouch down at his level, Luseph stretched out a hand, dragged the boy roughly between his knees, and embraced him sternly.

“Hush, now,” Luseph said with curbed ferocity and rose with Deacon gathered up into his arms. The father that remained in him had a strong desire to comfort the child. For many minutes he held Deacon till he felt the fearful, rigid body finally succumb to exhaustion and slip into a heavy sleep.

In Luseph’s bedchamber was a sturdy dark wood bed, its red silken covers embroidered intricately with gold thread. A tray of half-melted candles emitted the feeblest light. Luseph slept in a chair, while Deacon was tucked into the large empty bed. The door was securely fastened, so there was no fear of him breaking bounds, but Luseph’s repose did not long last before he sat up wearied. His fist pressed to his lips, he watched, silently, the child who slept in his bed.

Luseph was regretful of the life Deacon should have had and remembered with bitter clarity his own miserable childhood. He thought of his family that spat at the mere mention of magic and any thought of him studying it. It was for this very reason Luseph had moved to the Imperial city; to further his education in the ways of magic, and the moment he did so, he had lost his family.

His own brother had beaten him. He thought of his sister and how the only affection he could expect from her was a hard slap. His father would do everything but foam at the mouth should even the slightest mention of magic be uttered under his roof.

His mother alone understood him, but even she failed him—she perhaps most of all, for even with her understanding, she still turned her back on him. She was not willing to risk the sacrifice of her husband and other children for his sake. And so it was through bitter tears that she impressed on him that should he walk out that door, he should not bother to return.

He left without turning back, a boy of not quite sixteen. He had no family, but he had a home, the university, and so it was for many years until Travon had destroyed all he had worked for.

Luseph recalled a conversation he had with his Necromaster and the futile frustration he felt. In the dim musky room Luseph had stood before the old mage with the full face of youth and determined eyes; under his robes was a strong young body, and sheathed at his waist was a long sword. The contrast between the young mage and the frail older mage—with his bony hands and sallow skin—was considerable.

Luseph bore his gaze with a rigid dignity but inwardly shrivelled under the disapproving stare. The withered eyes sneered at his bronzed skin as though it were a brand of inferiority. The old man did not believe one could achieve his full potential while dividing his time between magic and weapons.

“Arch mage Travon is a powerful man who has many loyal to him. It would not be a fight we would win,” he had finally said to Luseph, who came to him in distress in regard to banning necromancy.

“Ah, I see,” said Luseph, hostile. “It is not respect you show, but fear.”

The Necromaster had responded cruelly, which ferocity Luseph bore with unflinching courage. After this he left the university and tried to live a normal life, which he achieved with Daenara for several happy years, until the Necromaster sent him a letter informing him of their location, and what they intended—Travon’s downfall.

Having grown uncomfortable in his chair, Luseph moved to stand by the narrow window. Beyond his reflection was a stretch of night. His thoughts went to Daenara. He knew how desperate she would be and desired that she

should be here with him. Her touch he longed for, yet he knew it would be difficult to make her understand. There was much pain and suffering for both of them yet.

In his study the following day, Luseph stood before the fireplace, lost in thought. He forgot for the moment the silent little presence that occupied the room with him. Presently, a young man entered the study. Preston was his apprentice. He was a youth of not more than sixteen years of age, though with his untainted self-assurance and arrogant disposition he appeared much older. Luseph treated the youth often harshly, though, at times, with the kind of pride that a father might have for a son, and Preston was eager to please Luseph.

“You require of me?” asked Preston, taking little notice of Deacon.

Luseph said, “Take the child. He’s in your care.”

Preston’s eyes turned onto Deacon with undisguised aversion; for a considerable length both regarded one another with uncertainty.

“Take him, you idle boy!” Luseph spoke with a measure of sternness. “I have warned you.”

Preston’s straight shoulders seemed to fall slightly, as if he was unimpressed with the task. With great reluctance he took Deacon by the hand and led him out.

Into a small dark room Preston took him. It was a storage room of sorts but hadn’t been used for a long time. It smelled of stone and dust and of daylight trapped too long. “You’re going to have to entertain yourself,” said Preston, lighting a small candle, which served only to cast haunting shadows on the empty walls. “You can sit there.” Preston indicated the only chair in the room.

He started for the door, when Deacon commenced pleading and crying again. “Quiet! Your mother isn’t here, you snively little nursling. If you were more of a lad and less of a lass, I would give you a flogging,” he said,

lifting Deacon up under the arms and plonking him down on the chair. “Now sit there, Misery.”

Preston then closed and locked the door behind him, paying no heed to the muffled sobs from the other side.

Chapter 7
A Loud Cry

Through a narrow rocky valley, the travelling party were compelled to dismount and lead their horses on foot. The ground was broken and uneven and had become slippery with ice and snow. Swirling above them the sky was dark and gloomy. Their heads bowed against the stinging wind they trudged on. Éomus had given Daenara an elven-made cloak, which kept her body exceptionally warm, but her heart was cold with despair.

The arctic breeze was restless. It did not only affect Daenara, but the entire party of men. The horses, too, were restless, tossing their manes, their breath misting as they whined with unease. Daenara and Éomus suddenly stopped, which in turn halted the rest of the party. They both felt the effects of evil.

Several small grey rocks tumbled down the side of the left wall, drawing everyone's attention up toward the cluster of large rocks. A shrill wail pierced the icy air and rang sharp in their ears. Daenara's horse reared so violently his reins were wrested from her hands. She tried in vain to calm the beast by clutching at his reins and speaking kindly. The men drew their swords in a state of readiness. Daenara sufficiently calmed the distressed animal to retrieve her sword, a gift from her brother that would not have been given in vain.

"Be not far from me," Éomus said hurriedly to Daenara. His silvery blade shone like sharp light on ice, drawn and ready. The words had only just fallen, when from high up on the walls came descending down on them, like a great flood, a mass of hideous brutes that bore grotesque resemblances to men. A brilliant burst of sheer energy erupted from the readied Imperial Guardians with the power of their collective will and blew apart the first descending wave, like an explosion.

Pooling down from both walls came these wretches, their leathery grey skin almost as thick as armour. They were relentlessly hideous. It seemed impossible that they should have the intelligence to wield swords. Nevertheless, they did each have a menacing-looking blade, and they rushed forth with a great thirst for blood.

The Guardians struck many down before the brutes could even reach them, throwing liquid-like spheres of energy that shattered bones and blew off limbs. A protective wall of force was also established, which slowed the Wreavers' advancement as though they were running underwater or against great winds. It was not long, however, before the narrow valley was flooded and a fierce battle raged between the two opposing forces. The monsters had the greater number, but the Guardians fought with the ferocity of the gods against the ferocity of the devil.

In the midst of it all, Aéoden drew on an immense amount of energy, fuelled by the fever of battle that burned in his chest and propelled a dozen Wreavers violently through the air. The vicinity round him was cleared briefly before he was again assailed. With a slash of his blade, Aéoden cut deep into a brute's exposed chest, then followed the stroke with another from his metal gauntlet, striking the wretch full in the face, mangling it into a blur of bloody flesh. Not far from him, Thedred hurled a shaft of heat which pierced the shoulder of another like a spear. His action prevented Aéoden from being struck from behind, and both men exchanged a brief acknowledgement of kinship.

Éomus was a fierce fighter. He cut down many foes, leaping over one to get to the next. Because of his lightness, speed and nimbleness, he was not easily matched. More than once he shouldered and slashed a foe attacking Daenara. She drew blood with the swing of her own blade with clean and precise strokes.

Man and monster fell without discrimination in one confused, bloody mass. The cold flash of magic along with the clashing of steel was chaos round Daenara. Love, anger, hate, all rose in a storm within her, and a strong wind, which her own being seemed to conjure from an unconscious source, began to gather, becoming so fierce her own hair lashed and stung her face.

Her eyes were as dark as the storm that raged round her and showed great penetration. For a moment she stood motionless, this volatile atmosphere tearing about her imposing form. Its tremendous gusts scattered the brutes in her path like leaves in a gale. Soon the destructive winds spent themselves; her body suddenly depleted of strength, she staggered backwards a little and found her back against the rock wall.

She started violently as one of her comrades suddenly slammed against it, very near to her, his blood staining the cold rock as he slumped, broken, to the ground at her feet. Frozen in terror, Daenara saw the monstrous thing that had tossed the unfortunate man gaze up hideously in her direction.

The hulking mass of advancing force, that seemed to crush all in its path, covered the short distance between them in an instant. Daenara cried out as the sharp pain of its embedded claw stabbed into her shoulder and spread down her arm like a thousand shards of ice through her veins. Seized by its vice-like claw, Daenara sank to her knees, panting, like a wounded lamb in the clutches of a beast. Her sword dropped from her hand and clanged to the stone.

The sounds of battle were far off and distant as she looked up into the abominable face of her captor. The smile that twisted its lips was the smile one wears when he has securely fastened his victim and relishes the moment of victory, before he savagely ends the torment. The brute raised its bloody sword over Daenara’s head, ready to strike; then suddenly the hideous features contorted with pain and a wail of rage. Daenara’s gaze fell to where a sharp blade was stuck through its belly from behind. She was released, and its claw having been the only thing holding her up, collapsed with a breathless gasp to the icy ground. Aéoden wrenched his blade from the monster, and before it could turn, lopped its hideous head clean off the rest of its form.

“Éomus!” he called wildly as he knelt at the fallen woman’s side, the sleeve of her dress drenched in her own blood. Her glassy eyes strayed about without focus, looking upward to the grey sky swirling above with gloomy malice. High above her she saw a single drop of rain fall. Slowly it fell—and seemed to fall and fall—like a silver bead streaming down, before she felt it cold upon her face. The single droplet ran down the side of her

marble cheek before many more fell. The cold drizzle she could not feel, nor any pain, save for the pain of knowledge. She had failed Deacon. He would be alone.

Even as she lay there with the rain on her face, the battled continued fiercely. Through her haze she saw vaguely a figure bent above her. The brightness of his countenance seemed to blind her; she closed her eyes against it, yet still through closed lids could she see that brilliant white. It engulfed her in its serene brilliance and a warm light suffused her, surely, softly, beautifully.

When her wet eyelids fluttered open, her lashes heavy with rain, Éomus was kneeling over her. She saw fading from his hands the effulgence that transfused life from himself into her. His face was solemn and grave; to heal one must give something of oneself, though it is always replenished a thousand-fold. Looking up into his face, Daenara opened her pale and trembling lips, but not a word came. He gathered her into his arms and took her to his horse, where he assisted her up into the saddle and quickly eased himself behind her. He spoke words to his horse and the beautiful beast started off with clean, easy strides, leaving the battle behind.

Save for the last few determined brutes, most of the Wreavers lay in a bloody mess over the wet, rocky floor of the valley, stinking and putrefying the atmosphere. It was not long before they were slain, and the victorious party caught up with Éomus and Daenara.

They stopped at a village situated snugly in the hollow of cold mountains. The village was composed of a small number of sturdy stone cottages, with slate roofs powdered with snow. In a cosy tavern that smelt of smoke and burning wood, they took rest and food. The hot little room was packed full. The few locals here seemed pushed up against the wall, holding their mugs of ale with looks of displeasure, eyeing the well-dressed intruders, who were overwhelming in their uniformity and proud militant air. Few travellers ever came this way and the locals enjoyed their solitude.

Daenara shrank close to the fire, her face pale and clammy. Éomus, sitting next to her, took her cold hands between his own.

“You will carry that wound for the rest of your life,” he said. His face was untouched by the harsh conditions, but his eyes were full of care and unhappiness.

“Better to have let her die,” Daenara heard one of the men say in a hushed voice to one of his comrades, in tones of pity and fellow feeling, sympathetic with the knowledge of her inevitable death.

Aéoden leaned against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, looking at her with compressed lips. Without addressing her, as though she were already dead, he spoke to Éomus. “We cannot take her further; she’ll have to stay here until we return. She can be of no more assistance at this point in any case and would be a hindrance,” he said, not unkindly. “One of the men will stay behind with her until our return.”

Éomus was not difficult to convince. It was his preference that she stay here and be safe. Thedred volunteered for this. Daenara was not entirely comfortable with him but had hardly the strength to object, and although she would have preferred Éomus to stay, she knew he would be greatly needed in fulfilling their task, since he was the only healer among them. Éomus and Daenara parted with a brief farewell; with an evanescent whisper of his devotion and a promise of his returning not alone.

Alone in her room, Daenara fastened the door. She stood a moment with her arms clasped round her body. It was night, and she was exhausted, but she could not sleep nor lie down. She was pervaded by a vast fear as she thought of Deacon in the clutches of dark mages, helpless against the perverse dealings of black hands. Thedred stood posted outside her door in the hallway. She could hear him pace restlessly.

Thedred was in the clutches of his own hell. His mind was hot with confused thoughts. He felt he could not bring himself to take her life and paced violently as he struggled with himself. He was used to witnessing the most gruesome of deaths and tortures, but this was all too close to home. He thought of his own young wife and child who awaited him. Goran, he knew, would not be suffering the same restlessness as he waited to extinguish the life of the child. Thedred knew the wretch would find some perverse

pleasure in the task that he himself had assigned. The thought made him ill, yet he had a fierce sense of duty he could not ignore.

Daenara soon heard the heavy tread stop dead. She could almost feel his presence standing directly outside the door. The silence and the intense stillness was somehow more unsettling than the restless steps. The pulse in her neck seemed to pause as her gaze fastened onto the handle of the door, waiting, a sense of anxiety rising within her. But there was nothing.

A feeling of weariness took her, and she sank down on the edge of the bed. She sat there for a good moment with her face buried in her hands, and then slowly she raised her eyes. She had heard a gentle scraping noise at the door, a drawing of bolts. The latch to her door slid slowly across. She rose cautiously as the door quietly opened. There Thedred stood, pale and haggard, like a man who was suffering greatly.

“What is it?” she asked nervously. “What is wrong?”

For a moment he did not answer but held her fixed with eyes that were intent and feverish. A bead of sweat gathered on his brow. His strangeness filled her with a sense of dread and urgency. His presence seemed to take up every space in the room, so that she felt she had nowhere to move. She remained perfectly still, feeling any sudden movement would provoke him and seal her fate.

“Forgive me,” he said breathlessly.

“Thedred,” she implored, retreating a step.

In a stride or two he had seized her. He grasped her firmly behind the neck.

“What are you doing?” she cried. “Let me go!”

She struggled against him with palms, elbows, and fists, but he held her close as one might restrain an hysterical lover. A strange tingling emitted from his hand behind her neck, and a sensation of numbness invaded her body. It was as though her very blood had run cold. She was helpless in his

embrace and would have sunk to the floor but for the powerful arms that still held her close. Silently her pleading eyes held his with an unswerving steadiness, willing him to stop, but he closed his eyes against her and rested his forehead upon her deathly face as though he might weep.

Frozen and staring, she was unable to move, but inwardly she was desperate. She could feel her lungs closing and gasped for air through numb lips. It was almost done when the candles suddenly died, and all became dark. She felt the strange hold on her relinquish and his body stiffen. She searched frantically for his face. There was just sufficient light for her to see him, ghastly and unrecognisable, his mouth gaping open in a silent cry. His eyes had shrivelled in their sockets until they were but two black holes, and the skin on his face had become tight-drawn, so that it was almost skeletal.

He released her and crumpled at her feet, nothing more than a ghastly corpse. Behind where he had been standing, Daenara saw in the shadows a shape of blackness. She choked and gagged, stooped over. The dark figure advanced from the shadows like a ghost from her past. Black robes completely draped his pale body.

“Luseph,” she gasped, as though she had not used her voice in a long time, her body trembling in pitiful weakness. “What have you done?”

He laid his thin fingers on her, and they were as ice upon her flesh. “You need not fear me,” he said in his pale voice. It was the last thing she heard before the world went silent and she felt herself sinking into a vacant blackness, an incredible gulf of emptiness.

Chapter 8
Evil Walks

In blind darkness, the first of Daenara's senses to return was her sense of smell. The poignant scent of leather hung heavy in the air. When her vision cleared and the shadow dispersed, she found herself sitting a chair. Luseph stood over her as though he had only just placed her there. She recognised she was in a study. It was a comfortable room yet for all its furnishings still felt hollow and stark. To the left of a writing table was a secretive-looking door; to the right was a small series of stone steps leading up into his bedchambers.

"This establishment," Luseph said, going over to an impressive bookcase, "is dedicated to the collection and preservation of all necromantic knowledge." He ran his hand affectionately across the leather spines. "It's important that you understand why I'm doing this." He turned his eyes, which gleamed like ice, toward her. "I have spent my nights and days in darkness, because I believe I can make things right."

He spoke passionately, but his face was inanimate, set cold with a single purpose and determination. Thought, suffering, and perseverance had all been at work upon his features so that the gaunt face could scarcely be recognised as her own husband.

"Where is Deacon?" she asked, rising unsteadily.

"He is safe and well," said Luseph, simply and unaffected.

"For how long will he be?"

The sting of accusation in her voice, along with knowledge of what was to come, caused Luseph to turn his back, resting his hand on the bookcase, his dark brows knitted. "Do not lose faith in me, Daenara," he said and showed evident signs of suffering. Seeing him thus distressed Daenara

restrained the words of scorn that burned on her lips. Her face suddenly waned.

“How can I not?” she asked. “I don’t know who you are anymore.”

“Yes, you do,” he answered quickly, his voice low and tense. “I am the same.”

“No, you are not!” she said in almost a cry. “I never saw a person so changed in all my life!”

There was a heavy weight in the air before he answered. “I am only doing what I must.”

“Will you let me go to him?” she asked without any hope of him granting her request. He did not answer. His neck was stiffened—set stubbornly against the misery of his position. At length he turned round, with a look almost mournful. He went to her, and as he drew very near, she held her place with faltering courage. He raised his hand to touch her, but with such heavy constraint on himself that his hand trembled, and catching himself up, he clenched his fist and placed it to his lips. He held her gaze with unspoken words, searching the depths of her being with the cold, blue flame in his gleaming eyes. She turned from him with sudden aversion, looking downward.

His iron will still holding its required position, the purpose which dominated his mind still unbroken, he could not soften to her, but nor could he inflict violence. “Would you like to sit by the fire?” he asked, tentatively.

“If you wish it,” she said, as if against her will.

For a moment or two Luseph held back before following after her. His heart was beating fast. There was a great deal of sorrow in his pleasure of having her with him. Presently, he seated himself opposite. He did not look at her but stared into the flame. He had become slighter, more spectral. An indefinable alteration had come over him and his entire manner. Something in him, inhuman and immovable, disturbed her.

“He shudders when I touch him,” Luseph said at last.

“Because he fears you,” she answered, her voice like a whip in the soundless room. “Because you would use him in your game against Travon, who has done nothing but—”

“Travon is a fool,” Luseph muttered between clenched teeth and rose sharply to his feet. “He limits man of his potential and condemns him to a life of subordination. His dictatorial arrogance will have us all prostrated before a single master.” Luseph had considerable command over his countenance, but the control cost him, the strain evident in his features. He shook his head with incredulous bitterness. “At what a tremendous height above the rest of us does Travon place himself. In time he will bring suffering upon the land.”

After a moment he regained composure and looked long and hard at Daenara. She sat rigid in her chair, panting, with eyes set on him as though she would destroy him.

“Do you honestly believe,” said Luseph, dispassionately, “that those men would deliver Deacon from evil, when Travon would have every last Riven annihilated? He hates them. Fears them.”

Daenara blinked, uncertain. An attempt had been made on her life. She could not, however, believe that Aéoden or Éomus had any part in it. “Travon would kill you and Deacon with his own hands if he were less of a coward. Life has little meaning to him beyond his own gain.”

“And what of you?” Daenara asked. “What is your fascination with death?”

“Life is where my fascination lies; to understand life you must also understand the mysteries of death.”

“You are not so very different from him,” she said. “You show to perfection how easily idealism can twist into cruelty that you would use your own son—”

“I would not hurt him!” Luseph broke in passionately.

“I do not believe you!”

“I would not. Not more than is necessary to achieve what must be achieved.” Then, suddenly careworn, his expression waned. “Come.” He beckoned in a wearied way. “Be not far from me. Come nearer to me.”

When Daenara made no move, he crouched down before her and clasped affectionately the inert hands that rested in her lap. His features had softened, but always was this underlying mass of cold, unliving darkness beneath the surface.

“At the end you will see that this was all necessary,” he said, officiously.

“The end never justifies the means,” she said, hating him for his cold blood. Then, low and trembling, “I despise you.” Yet even as she spoke her heart was breaking. Not a muscle in his body moved, not one whisper of breath showed that he was living, only he stared with an intensity that was menacing. She was shuddering slightly and looked back at him with dark eyes.

“Take care,” he said, with a coolness that from any other man might have been anger. He left Daenara to sit dazed and alone, disappearing behind the secretive door. The instant it was shut behind him, Daenara was on her feet and at the door to the study, which she was surprised to find not fastened, and slipped out. Luseph evidently cared little that she wandered the building and had taken no pains to fasten the lock.

Without a thought of where she was going Daenara went purely by feeling. Torches lining the walls were barely sufficient to bring luminance to the terrible place, and she had not yet come across any living person. Black forms—shapeless and mute—glided past every now and then: ghostly shapes that drifted without purpose. Each time one passed, Daenara closed her eyes. She was loath to consider what other night-wonders inhabited this abominable place. Most of the doors were locked, and from behind some she could hear the inhuman wails and mournful bellows of

tormented creatures. They drew the deepest pity from Daenara and made her all the more desperate to find Deacon.

She came across a majestic archway with strange and frightful carvings. Beyond the archway was an enclosed garden. Odd things grew here that filled the air with the pungent, earthy scent of resin and plant life. Several people clad in black and purple robes gathered herbs, performing the task devotedly. She left quickly again, unnoticed. Walking down a hallway Daenara observed two men slumped on a stone bench. At first she thought them dead, for their bloated bodies were limp and partially decayed, their clothes tattered and torn. She was horrified to discover they were not.

She checked a scream that leapt to her throat, as the bodies rose to their feet in a dozy, ungainly manner. To see corpses endowed with life made Daenara's abhorrence of the place become all the greater. They slowly started toward her. Their brains seemed stupefied, like men walking in their sleep. The ankle of one of them rolled gruesomely under itself in a dreadful limp, as though the bone itself was broken, but there showed no signs of pain in the lacklustre eyes, which stared forward apparently without sight. Deep droning moans issued from their gaping mouths without articulation or any sign of comprehension.

As they advanced down the hall in their gruesome fashion, Daenara stood aside, pressing against the wall. As they passed, the odour of decay and damp earth was oppressive. She quickly moved on round the corner. There, leaning next to some door, was Preston. He was talking casually to a young woman when he looked up and saw Daenara. Pushing himself off the wall, he dismissed the girl and addressed the newcomer with a touch of patronization.

"Are you lost?" he asked. "Perhaps I can help you find your way back."

That he had been the only one to notice her gave Daenara the impression that the youth knew something. She confronted him and demanded what they had done with her child. Preston remained passive and smug. She pushed past him, frantically grasped the door handle, and shook it impatiently.

“Open it,” she demanded.

Unhurriedly, Preston unlocked the door for her. He barely stood aside as she pushed through and tumbled into a dark room. Her heart sank to find it empty. Preston stepped into the room behind her.

“It is perhaps wise,” he said, “that you do not bring my master’s anger down upon yourself. Allow me to return you to him.”

The arrogance of the youth’s composure infuriated Daenara. “What have you done with him?” she demanded. The outburst of passionate feeling struck Preston with an intense force, and he was hurled against the wall out in the hallway. Slumping down, he was a moment stunned. He soon recovered, and with his hands splayed across the wall for support, slowly drew himself up. Daenara was doubtful now, startled by her own outburst. Preston advanced with a tense walk and clenched fist. She stumbled back from him. He caught her arm roughly. He had meant to strike her, but in the same instant compelled himself to regain control over his temper.

“Do not anger me,” he said, jerking her toward him. In no gentle fashion he escorted her back to Luseph’s study, and shoving her over the threshold, closed the door, leaving her alone.

Luseph was still shut up in the strange room. She could hear hideous and convoluted speech and Luseph conversing in some black tongue to whatever made such tortured intonations. She started when the door suddenly opened and Luseph emerged. He looked strange and abstracted, as though dwelling in the nether regions between life and death.

He sat wearily at his writing table, in silence, eyes drawn under dark brows. Presently, he raised an open palm to indicate the door behind her. Daenara turned and saw it open. Preston entered and held the door open briefly for another. Daenara’s heart leaped when she saw the little treasure she cherished so dearly wander into the room. She uttered a sob, and in an instant was on her knees, smothering him with kisses and frantic caresses, in between searching his body to see if he was still intact.

All this kissing threw him off balance, and he would have fallen, had not the loving arms that held him gathered him up into a fierce embrace. Deacon could only sob and answer his mother's caresses by clinging to her, hiding his face. Any efforts to speak were stifled with sobs, too broken and incoherent even for his mother to understand.

Daenara sank to the floor with him in her lap, his arms wrapped tight about her neck. There she held him, and there he remained. Her mouth buried in his hair, she spoke hushed words to him, so quiet no other ears could hear, to which he would nod silently in response. He cried so hard that she felt his body convulse with each sharp little inhalation long after he had quieted and stilled. He settled close against his mother's bosom. There he clung with a sense of protection and security. Too young to understand the nature of this frightful occurrence he showed only relief now that he was in her arms. His only fear was of her going away.

He became heavy and dozy, and Daenara found herself lulled into peacefulness, comforted by the small weight she nursed in her arms. This feeling of safety was but transient, and a fear came to her heart. Preston stood over them. Daenara looked up at him with a gaze of stupefied terror. Unable to move, she cleaved to Deacon. As if for the first time the knowledge of his misfortune had become apparent, she uttered a little cry and, beginning to tremble, stammered a few frightened words. Preston paid no heed and reached down and lifted Deacon.

With a broken, sobbing sound, she said, "No, please." Reaching for Deacon, trying to cling to him, her very senses seemed parting from her with terror. As if suddenly awaking from a fearful sleep, Deacon roused. He began to cry and became highly excited. The spectacle of his mother's anguish made him struggle fearfully, sobbing as if his little heart would break.

Luseph appeared calm and unaffected by the cries and entreaties, giving no indication of the emotions that convulsed him inwardly. He arrested all her attempts and, with an uncompromising hand, sat her down into a seat. The moment he removed his hand, she leapt to her feet, but the door was shut and Deacon gone. Turning round, she looked to Luseph with an expression of agonized entreaty that was more painful for him to see than

the most bitter of tears. Luseph’s expression remained unmoved, but his heart was like ice into which a searing rod has been thrust. His resolve, however, did not fail him. He looked at Daenara with an expression that made her go very white. As he started purposefully for the door she cried after him and clutched at his arm, though something in his manner told her there was nothing in his nature she could appeal to. He paused, then, shaking her off, slipped out the door with a painful grimace. Though his intentions did not falter for an instant, he was very sorry for the pain he was about to inflict on his son.

Daenara went for the door but was suddenly seized by the wrists and held with dry, dead fingers. One of the abominable undead men had her in his grasp. In her confusion she hadn’t noticed how it came to be there. In fright she slowly sank down, so low that if the creature had suddenly released her, she would have fallen to the floor. The horror of its face had her transfixed with some sick fascination, so that she could not remove her gaze from its eyes that were so devoid of life yet so fixed with purpose.

Chapter 9
Reunited

Daenara saw all too clearly the absence of any warmth or life to make an appeal to in the creature. Kneeling before its gruesome body, her wrists held in the deathly grasp, her thoughts ran wildly, searching for means to facilitate an escape. She was frantic at what cruelties and violations, practised by dark mages, might be inflicted upon Deacon at that moment. She could feel they were doing something to him. She sought to clear her mind and consciously draw on that hidden source of strength which had sometimes come in her greatest need, but she was prevailed upon by an overwhelming sense of some violent situation approaching.

She glimpsed flickering images—the surface rippled so that she could not see clearly. Then, in the form of a terrible vision, she saw that Aéoden and his men had made successful ingress. They were fighting and being destroyed by the same cruel force that would destroy Deacon. She felt that it was happening this moment. She went cold, trembling as though suffering from fever. She could feel the magnified commingling of hate, fear, and agony.

The tumult of her mind was painfully great, but amidst all this she grasped one image and saw it lie clearly before her: Luseph writhing in a state of wretchedness, his flesh burning. She could almost feel his pain as her own. She knew he was dying. Then suddenly she could no longer feel or sense him, not a shadow or glimpse, as if he had been torn out of being into infinite silence—dark vastitudes where she could not reach him. She was cut adrift, blinded by chaos.

Her face was bent between her raised arms, eyes squeezed shut against the hideous images, but they stayed vivid in her mind’s eye, a seemingly endless sequence of frightful images of bloodshed. Then something amid the turmoil brought Daenara’s cowering mind back to the room. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the door to the study was being pushed

open. For some reason that opening door fascinated her, and she forgot the confusion in her head. She gave a gasp that ended in a sob.

Éomus, in one fluid movement, entered, and with a precise swing of the blade, lopped the monster's hands clean off at the wrists. Its body stumbled back, but its horrible fingers stayed persistently clasped round her wrists. Éomus turned quickly to her. For the moment he looked not how he used to. His face was pale and drawn, his eyes wide and dilated, so that only a thin rim of ice-blue was left. He cut the dead, clinging hands from her, then confronted the decayed being. It had recovered balance and came at him, with no sign of rage, but with a single focus and unstoppable purpose to kill him. Éomus took off its head, then applied the finishing stroke and cut it down at the legs.

Here Aéoden shouldered his way through the door with tremendous energy. In his arms was Deacon. Daenara received Deacon into her arms with profound, unthinkable gladness. She clutched him with fierce determination that nothing would again separate them. She looked over at Éomus and Aéoden. Through the merits of their blood they had delivered Deacon from the hands that would do him harm. Aéoden did not stay; he dashed out into the hallway where he faced the trouble that had followed him.

Daenara quickly set Deacon on the floor, and, crouching down, sought any injury to him. There was a considerable amount of blood on his cheek and clothes. She was relieved to discover that it was not his own. She noticed, however, that the palm of his left hand was bleeding from a clean, straight cut.

Éomus had already set to work on preparing a portal spell, through which he meant for them to escape. Meanwhile Daenara bundled up the little one's injured hand with a torn piece of her dress. His eyes, fixed on her, were unemotional, unresponsive. His face was ashen and expressionless like one greatly overwhelmed. Her fingers trembled so violently that she had a great deal of difficulty tying the knot. The full impact of the shock she had suffered was now upon her. Soon she felt strong hands on her, aiding her to stand. She lifted Deacon into her arms.

“You must come quickly,” said Éomus, trying to lead her, but she laid a detaining hand on his arm.

“We cannot return to the Imperial,” she said, hastily. “Travon—”

“Word has been sent of his treachery,” said Éomus. “He and Goran shall be held accountable. All is well! Trust me! Come quickly!” Taking Daenara by the arm he hurried her forward, leading her to the oval void that was like a split or opening in the atmosphere itself. Holding her son tight in her arms Daenara stepped toward the swirling mass. The air bristled round her with a charged energy, and turbulent winds blew her hair wildly about. Through the glare she could not see through to the other side, but Éomus assured her it would take her promptly to the safety of her brother’s home.

She drew a shuddering breath. Within the next few steps she would be out of this terrible place. Standing on the threshold, Daenara stole a lingering gaze at Éomus with uncertain eyes. His face told her he would not be accompanying her. She feared it would be the last time she would see him.

“Look to the north—there you shall see me coming to you,” Éomus said. Then: “Daenara,” catching her arm as she turned. “It was Luseph who spared your son’s life, at the cost of his own.”

Daenara faltered. The knowledge of it struck her with emotions that she could not yet identify. She nodded wordlessly, then stepped through the portal. Instantly she was engulfed by wind and light, passing through atmospheric layers, temperatures and pressures. The air she breathed was very thin and took away her consciousness.

Daenara awoke to comfortable silence. Gentle rays of afternoon sunlight shone through the glass doors of her room. Thaemon was stationed next to her bedside, deep concern along with relief in his countenance. By degrees recollection forced itself through Daenara’s mind. Sitting up, immediately alert, she asked where Deacon was. Half-rising from his chair Thaemon eased her back down, telling her to rest, and assuring her Deacon was safe with Clara. Daenara reluctantly lay back, finding her strength was depleted.

Soon Clara appeared at the doorway, leading Deacon. His injured hand had been bandaged properly, and a bruise showed on his forehead, but he was otherwise unharmed. Daenara sat up with outreached arms for him to come to her, and he quickly availed himself of the privilege. Having Deacon in her embrace, her body as well as her heart was warm, but it was not to last.

“Has Éomus returned?” she asked Thaemon, expecting disappointment.

His look of concern deepened. “They have not yet come back.”

After this time Deacon became withdrawn. He showed little interest in any but his mother, and would not suffer her to leave him even for an instant. Thaemon had tried to explain to his children that Deacon had lost his father and impress upon them that they must not provoke or harass him with many words, but let him be quiet.

Bearing a tray of tea and toast, Berrel slipped into a dimly-lit room. All was quiet, the stillness not one of content rather of mournful reflections. Daenara stood by the window holding Deacon, both covered by a large blanket as though winter had come. She pressed her lips against his temple in a motionless kiss. His face marked with care and trouble, he looked not so much her baby as her companion in misfortune—two reclusive creatures belonging to nothing but each other.

“How are we this evening?” Berrel asked, setting down the tray. Her sympathy was energetic, when they wished to be still. “Perhaps later you might like to sit downstairs for a while?” she said, taking the blanket from round their shoulders in her robust way and laying it folded on the foot of the bed.

“Perhaps,” replied Daenara, half-heartedly brushing Deacon’s hair down, as though to make him look more respectable.

Berrel was about to pour the tea, when the door slowly creaked open, and peering in were two inquisitive little faces, looking slightly guilty. Daenara beckoned them in, but they stepped inside nervously. They looked

to Deacon with bright questioning eyes, not understanding his unapproachableness.

“Won’t you come down and say hello to your cousins?” asked Berrel, looking at Deacon. “Aren’t you glad to see them?” He was unresponsive, his strangeness causing the children to be silent. “There, see how they fret for you?” said Berrel. She meant this as encouragement, but it rather sounded as reproach. She sighed with deep resignation. “Your mother’s arms will grow tired, holding you.”

Daenara felt Deacon grow tense, and his arms tightened, as though the words had been a threat to cheat him of her. “Perhaps we shall come down afterward,” she said, her tone dismissive.

“Right, then,” said Berrel, and taking herself out, ushered the children along with her. Once alone Daenara placed her little one in the arm chair by the fire. For a moment she gazed down on him with troubled eyes, trying to read his darkened thoughts. Words were seldom passed between them anymore, and though he would not be without her, Deacon had become much less affectionate, coiled tightly within himself.

“Will you not eat something?” she urged. He only shook his head and did not lift his face. “Shall I read to you?”

He did not answer. She watched him with increasing pain. He seemed so strange and distant she could scarcely refrain from crying. In the glow of the fire he sat quiet, staring absently. His face was solemn and grave beyond his years. He had been accustomed to evil at too young an age. Daenara felt convinced that he was greatly changed.

“Deacon,” she said softly. “Come sit with me.” She held out a hand to him, her voice gentle and persuasive. Obediently he slid from his chair, and she lifted him up onto her lap. She pressed her lips to him and felt something inside her die, feeling that a piece of him was lost to her, never to be restored. She kissed him softly over the eyes, cheeks, and his entire face. The full realization of how very near she had come to losing him was upon her. Deacon glanced up at her wistfully. She smiled bleakly, kissing fondly the little fingers that reached up to touch her lips. She had nothing to say to

him, no comforting words. Though his face was serious and enigmatic he was still only a baby.

The fire burned very low. For the past hour he had lain absolutely still, his face turned against her breast, peaceful and trustful. She sat calm and awake, looking down on him heavily. Her back began to grow stiff, yet she did not wish to move and felt strangely rested. At last she lifted him in her arms and drew herself out of the chair. Placing him in bed, she watched a moment to see if he would stir. When certain he was in a sound sleep, she fetched a light shawl and ventured outside.

The moon was obscured by a thin veil of clouds. Daenara made her way down past the stables and the inn. She crossed the large stone bridge and went into the fields. The trees were dark in the distance. She drew her shawl closer around her shoulders, looking upward, searching the pretty sky. Stars glittered high above her in the heavens. Yet she felt immensely alone, ever her thoughts on Éomus. She knew he would come, if he lived.

A low breeze rippled through her skirt, lonely, silent, and desolate. Then, as she looked toward a great bright star to the north, a sweet breeze blew and brought with it a new hope. A great expectation rose within Daenara, delicately, like a flower blooming in spring after a frosty winter. The scent lingered in the night air, and there, coming over a gentle rise with a steady, even stride, was Éomus. His countenance was serene, free from all care and trouble, and shone with benevolence and grace such as to dim the stars.

Vibrant with suppressed excitement, Daenara waited breathlessly. How slowly he came to her. Only a few more steps and she would be in his arms. Daenara flung herself about his neck, and with irrepressible joy was lifted to his chest and kissed with the sweetest, tenderest of kisses. Éomus had borne many winters, and had a great capacity to love. While Daenara was many, many years younger than he, she was capable of inspiring deep devotion, for her soul was aged greater than her body, and she was true and kind.

“My heart is not fleeting and changing as the wind, but ever enduring,” said Éomus. Their heads bent intimately toward one another, Daenara

listened to his soothing accents with a pervading sense of undying love.

Chapter 10
Elven Realm

Many years had been filled with happiness for Daenara after her joyful reunion with Éomus. He had taken her and Deacon to live with him in Loriendale, a most glorious place with a hushed sense of peace. The moment Daenara entered into the beautiful woods she had been immersed in a sense of well-being, induced by the beauty and rareness of a place so natural it possessed a kind of reverence. The stillness all so calm and soothing a repose, an intensity of rest and quietude.

Soft light issued from lamps illuminated the woods like captured moonlight. Evenings were sacred to the elves, a time for reflection and connecting with one's higher self. No evening passed without a graceful hymn that lingered on the breeze, soothing and uplifting. In the days the woods were filled with a strange radiance that filtered gold though the foliage.

There were rushing waterfalls of crystal purity, ferns laden with silver dew, elegant trees that seemed to drape and sweep down for the single purpose of caressing the earth. Fine dwellings were interwoven through nature with exquisite harmony. The structures were built around the existing landscape, embracing the trunks and branches of the elven-trees, but stabilised by significant stone pillars on the ground—causing no harm to the trees. Elves have an affinity with all living things, and a deep reverence for life.

Both men and women who dwelled here were equally matched in their clear, unchanging beauty. Their countenances were illumined with an inner light. Among them was Éomus's sister, Ellendria, whose whiteness outshone them as the moon outshines the stars. She possessed the air of a celestial being, with grace and benevolence. Her grey eyes were profound in their depths and shone with the light of the everlasting.

Daenara strolled leisurely out onto the marble terrace overlooking a garden. The fair light of the sun graced her unbound hair which fell in waves over her bare shoulders. Although Daenara had aged twenty mortal years, she was still a beautiful woman, pale and delicate in health. Her melancholy spirit only enhanced her fragile loveliness.

The silver railing was smooth and cool under her hand, the air sweetly scented with flowers. Down below in the garden she could see Deacon conversing with an elfmaiden, into whose golden hair were woven white flowers. Standing together, among trees laden with white and pink blossoms, the two were as morning and night: she, bright and fair, and he, dark and still.

There was considerable conservatism in his manner and proud command in his bearing. Yet he seemed to grow mildly agitated as he conversed with the elfmaiden. She, however, remained patient and lofty. Her gentle gaze settled on the trees rather than on him. They stood near enough to one another that a passing glance might perceive them lovers, but there was a division between them greater than that between their bodies.

Daenara withdrew inside. The room itself was splendid with a lofty elegance. She was preoccupied arranging flowers in a vase when Deacon unexpectedly joined her. His kiss brought a smile to her lips. “I see Mariwen has arrived home,” she said.

He nodded. “Just this afternoon.”

Daenara looked up over the flowers at her son. He stood leaning against the table, with a frown on his brow, as he brooded over thoughts of the elven-girl.

“I expected you might be spending the rest of the day with her?” Daenara mentioned this in passing, but implications in her tone darkened his mood.

“No,” he answered, idly. “These ones are beautiful,” he said, reaching over the table and taking a rose from the arrangement; roses were his

mother’s favourites. Not being a flower person himself, he found they were the only ones he took pleasure in, perhaps because of her.

Daenara smiled as he looked absently at the flower, twisting the stem between his fingers. She knew where his thoughts lingered. “I do very much like her,” she said.

Deacon glanced up at his mother, then turned his face aside. “She has treated me with nothing but cold vanity,” he said. Always there was a controlled stillness in his voice. “She’s not so different from the rest of them,” he muttered, returning the rose.

He often spoke of elvenkind with an aversion Daenara could never understand. While she knew the elves had a very different manner of expressing themselves, she could not understand Deacon’s estrangement from them, as he had spent most of his life among them.

Daenara was grateful for all the elves had done and could not share his dislike, but she no longer took it upon herself to correct him. She was weary, and the more she tried to defend them, the more his disaffection seemed to grow, but this newfound coolness toward Mariwen she wondered at; he had always had an affection for her. Daenara could almost guess why. Nevertheless, she did not question him and left him alone though it hurt to do so.

Deacon was tall and strikingly handsome, with coal-black hair and keen blue eyes. Taking himself over by the window, he gazed out with a discontented air. In spite of his guarded nature it was not difficult for Daenara to see that he suffered. There was frustration and pain and a desire to escape.

A restlessness had come upon him, a haunted sense of incompleteness. Always he had this feeling that he was missing something in the world outside. Time passed here without account, as though he walked in a waking dream. At times he was overwhelmed by a feeling of being shut in by the trees, trapped in a world in which he felt he had no part. He had no outlet for his frustration and suffered the strain of withholding himself. To

see his mother in a state of such fragility caused him to struggle with all his soul to spare her his burdens.

His eyes so dark and intent, Daenara could not help but be reminded of another. The concept of Deacon's future was so inseparable from the painful image of his father that she was afraid; she feared that the fate which took her husband would overtake her son. Grave premonitions haunted her, though her health did not permit her to see them clearly, leaving a vast and nameless fear for him.

"You become more like him each day," she observed, in a wistful tone of affection, along with the stronger undertone of fear.

Deacon looked round at her. "Let us not speak of him." He was trying for gentleness but was unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. The thought of his father roused his more violent emotions.

"I have dreams sometimes," Daenara said. "Dreams as I used to have of your father; only they are about you." She looked to him fretfully. "I fear I will lose you as I lost him."

A slight cough had him at her side instantly. "Mother, you are ill and not strong enough for this agitation," he said, leading her over to a chair.

"He was not always that way," she said, sitting down.

"The afternoon is fine," Deacon said, desiring to spare them both the unhappy direction in which the conversation was turning. "Would you like to walk a while? I will go with you if it pleases you."

"He was a good man once," she said.

"Do not speak of him. Rest. Please."

"Will you bring me some water?" asked Daenara, seeing him distressed, wanting to give him a task.

Though he had only vague remembrance of his father, Deacon had been sufficiently informed to loathe any talk of the man with whom he was far

too closely associated. Éomus and Daenara had kept nothing from him, knowing that if they did not tell him, they must attempt to conceal it from him, which he would have no doubt perceived as betrayal.

Deacon fetched a glass of water for his mother. His hand touched hers as he steadied the glass and he thought how frail her hands suddenly appeared to him, yet they were as perfectly soft as he remembered them in his childhood. It distressed him that the veins were becoming more prominent; they seemed almost swollen beneath the translucent skin. She suffered still the poisonous effects of evil. The elves had sustained her all these years, but she had grown weaker each passing one. At times she frightened Deacon, falling into terrible fevers from which she recovered more slowly each time. Watching her slowly wither made his chest ache with a persistent and constant pain. It hurt him to see her fade away, while the elves remained unchanging.

Sipping the water, Daenara spoke no more of her foreboding, but Deacon could see she was still afflicted with dark thoughts. Drawing a chair up very close to hers, he seated himself and took her hands firmly in his own. “I’ll not make his mistakes,” he said, determined, placing her hand to his lips. Her eyes that met his with appreciation looked tired but retained their strength.

Deacon arose the minute Éomus made his presence known and gave him only a brief and cool acknowledgement. Deacon’s thoughts about the elves were often inaccurate and unreasonable, but for all that, he at times touched onto the truth with painful accuracies. He thought them frozen in their perfection, and elves did, at times, act disdainfully towards the younger races. However, many elves themselves would be the first to admit they were not free from vices. They were aware that, while time brings forth understanding and wisdom, just because a being is old does not mean that he is wise.

He gave his mother’s hand a parting pressure and took himself outside, taking a solitary walk as he often did. He felt insignificant here, his existence seeming to account for nothing. He was envious of the more finished race that surpassed him in speed and strength and longevity. It seemed a cruel trick in nature that not only had they more time, but they

excelled at a quicker rate, far beyond what humans could hope to achieve. Unlimited desire but limited means seemed a permanent condition of humankind.

Rivens were a proud race, and this trait had found itself in Deacon. By sheer brute force he could bend magical energies to his will, but he had yet to learn how to focus his efforts so as not to expend unnecessary energy. He had often thrown himself into a fever, driving himself to the absolute limits of his endurance. His magical energies were interwoven with his lifeforce, and they were drawn on simultaneously. This was his unique source of strength. However, where an ordinary mage might only exhaust his magical resources, a Riven could deplete entirely his lifeforce and end his own life.

Finding a comfortable place alone in the woods, Deacon sat down against a tree. The wind was laden with fresh woodland scents and seemed to give reprieve from his thoughts. His attention was caught by an odd little bug that settled on the back of his hand. A faint, one-sided smile touched his lips. The bug had furry little feelers and feet that gave the appearance of boots. He watched with gentle fascination as it crawled along his finger, unaware of its observer. Suddenly it flew off but did not get very far. It had got itself tangled in an intricate net of silk thread.

Crouching down for closer observation, Deacon watched as the spider rapidly secured its prey. Seized in the sticky thread, the insect did not stand a chance against the swift-moving spider. Its legs all buckled up as the venom began to immobilize it, yet still it fought vigorously for its right to live.

Deacon would remove it from the web, but to save the life of the insect would be to take away the sustenance for the spider. With a dark expression of pity, he watched the insect struggle. He thought it a flawed system that life must take life to sustain itself. The ceaseless and monotonous buzzing drove him half-wild. With a flick, Deacon set aflame his own hand, meaning to put them both out of the misery of existence, when he saw not far off, Mariwen drifting through the trees.

Immediately he clenched his fist, snuffing out the flame. She had not yet perceived him there and strolled leisurely in the fair day, evidently with

light and pleasant thoughts. Wearing a dress of the palest green she was a lovely vision to behold.

Chapter 11
Mariwen

Deaconturned to make his way through the woods in the opposite direction, hoping that Mariwen would not see him. He felt too often with her the sting of disappointment. However, he had betrayed his presence by the slightest noise, and she called to him, asking if he would join her. The lilting musical voice cut through him like smooth glass, yet he found he could not deny her request.

Together they walked along an intimate path under an arch of trees. As Mariwen walked contently, Deacon steadily regarded her, his mood intense. He envied her sense of belonging. She was content and happy here. This was her home. Every aspect of the woods appeared to delight her, and he was jealous of everything that took her attention away from him. He desired that he should be the source of her pleasure.

“You look as though you belong to the wood,” he said, bringing her attention to himself. Her solitary musing was a great bitterness to him.

“I do,” she said smiling, “and I shall spend all my days here.”

As she moved away to touch one of the trees, Deacon let his hand gently catch the skirt of her dress, letting the light folds slip though his fingers. He watched as she kindly fondled the draping foliage. In her every movement was beauty and subtlety. Despite his aversion to the elves, her loveliness was the one beauty to captivate him. She was not grave like the others but free and elusive as the wind. For many years he had known Mariwen but seldom did he see her. She dwelled often in the realm of her father’s people. Her absences only increased his longing for her.

“We should seek often to be alone with nature,” said Mariwen, resting her hand on the tree, “and she will whisper to us her secrets.”

“She does not wish to speak to me nor share her secrets.”

“You must be patient.”

“To what end?” he asked, frustrated.

“She will in time,” replied Mariwen, rejoining him. “But only so far as you are willing to listen.”

The conversation threw him into a peculiar state of agitation, and they were quiet for some time. Quite absorbed in her he was not content to walk at her shoulder. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. He did neither. Something in her manner was always capable of keeping him at a distance. Not once had he laid a hand on her. There was an ever present divide between them he could not close, though he desperately wanted to.

He marvelled, not without some bitterness, at the hardness of her heart, despite her fair and yielding form. Soon his gaze shifted from Mariwen—to look upon her gave him a longing in his heart that only caused him pain. She glanced over, and Deacon knew she saw the same dark, disappointed look she had often seen.

“Upon what thought does your mind linger?” she asked. “I see sadness in your eyes.”

Deacon, conscious of growing pale, was annoyed at himself for revealing any sign of weakness. He glanced at her, then away from her questioning gaze. Finally he spoke brutally plainly. “I was thinking how much I want to leave here.”

“Why is it that you wish to leave?”

“I cannot breathe here,” he said with a look of ill-disguised aversion. “But I cannot abandon my mother.”

“Her health fails her still?”

Deacon nodded once, leaving his head inclined, and compressing his lips painfully.

“Do not despair,” she said sorrowfully. “Your mother is strong and here we have the best healers in all the world.” After a moment of silence, Mariwen asked, “Is she content here? Your mother?”

“She is.”

“Then why are you not?”

Deacon exhaled discontentedly before answering. “There is nothing here for me, beyond my mother. She alone keeps me from leaving.”

The last he spoke almost insolently, searching Mariwen’s face for any sign of hurt. There was none, and his face grew hard.

“There is nothing here for you?” she repeated plaintively.

“There is nothing,” he said cruelly. She had caused him so much suffering it was easy for him to be cruel.

“Does she know this is your feeling?”

“I would not burden her,” he said simply, but the cost of his effort in sparing his mother was plain on his face, and Mariwen felt a great affection for him in that moment. Gradually their walking slowed until they stopped entirely and stood facing one another under the mottled shade of the trees.

“What makes you so miserable here?” Mariwen asked. “What is it you seek?”

“I don’t know,” Deacon answered. Besides her, he didn’t know what he was looking for. “Glory, honour, renown,” he said, as though they were standard aspirations of men. “I want to be far from the wretchedness of common existence.” The last he said with a kind of disgust, a fear and detestation of mediocrity.

“What is common about your existence?” she said with a smile.

He had no answer, and she could see how he suffered.

“My mind is restless, I hardly know for what,” he said at last. “The days are passing, and I have not yet fathomed for what purpose they are given to me. I have a longing, a craving, and I cannot tell for what. Do not tell me to listen for it in the rain or the whisper of the leaves.” He was restless and intolerant.

“You must be patient. It is our greatest defence against sorrow and our greatest virtue,” she said in a tone that irritated Deacon in his present mood. He wanted comfort, and she gave him counsel.

Mariwen was young, younger than he, but she thought him to have young eyes as yet and believed she should lead and correct him. Deacon thought it did not bother him, but deep below the surface he was nettled. He hated her way of patiently dealing with him and her lofty sense of superiority.

“And how do you suppose that?” he asked, trying to keep his temper. “I consider patience neither sustaining nor praiseworthy.”

“Patience enables us to bear all things,” said Mariwen, “and is the foundation for all the virtues. Therefore, it is the greatest. It is what my people have always endeavoured to maintain.”

Deacon frowned. “It must be very easy to be patient when you are gifted with time,” he said with a sharpness that silenced her. Mariwen lightly rested her open palm on his cheek, and he felt his chest expand with a rush of fresh air, filling his senses with the scent of the woods. Closing his eyes with relief, he hadn’t realized how hard-clenched he was until softened under her tenderness.

“Do not give way to hopelessness,” she said. “In time all things will come into our understanding.”

In her expression was such sweetness, Deacon began to feel confident in her affection for him. Her fingers brushed over his cheek, light as a feather. The pleasure which her touch afforded was rarely felt by him. The very notion of holding her made his blood beat fiercely. It was so strong a desire he felt he would burst out in brutality, but he would rather go without

her forever than do her any harm and knew a strong hand would only drive her further away from him. He would have to be patient and pin her delicate wings subtly with a gentle hand.

Chapter 12
Ailment

In a grove of immense trees Deacon stood, trying to quiet his mind. A stream of sunlight filtered brilliantly through the golden foliage. A carpet of leaves lay at his feet. Lightly, he laid his hand upon one of the thick, stately trunks, and with an audible sigh, waited; listening. There was nothing: no divine wisdom, no whisperings, nor any such revelation, only an intense silence that seemed to envelop him. Presently there was a slight stirring, a breezy whisper, imperceptibly soft, more of a sigh, lost almost amongst the rustling of the leaves. Always just a little out of articulative range, it was too elusive for him to grasp.

Standing alone Deacon felt that his presence was an intrusion and that Nature was withholding from him, denying him. The more he seemed to press her, the more she would turn from him. His presence was nothing to her. She was laughing at him.

Deacon took himself down to the part of the woods where the elves forged weapons. Thankfully, no one was there. When Deacon was not with his mother he often came here and laboured all through the day, crafting all manner of things. There were two reasons he worked so decidedly hard: one was to keep himself occupied and his mind free from painful reflections, and the other was to exhausted himself, so that he would sleep through the ghastly, deathful nights, when he was alone with only his thoughts.

With rapid expertise, Deacon turned and hammered the red-glowing metal. His hair, heavy with smoke and sweat, fell into eyes that were intent and concentrated. The sleeves rolled up above his elbows showed muscular forearms covered in a sheen of sweat. His hands, covered in smoke-smudge, were strong and fine, capable of works of great skill.

He had forged two fine swords for his cousins, Cedrik and his younger brother Derek, who was born much later. For their sister, Brielle, he had beautifully crafted a delicate bracelet from the finest of materials, though

she was probably fit to wield a sword of her own. It had been several years since he last saw his cousins. His mother could not endure the journey even by portal, which Deacon had sometimes used to visit by himself when she was not well enough to accompany him, but it was a form of travel he rarely used. He despised being dependent on using Éomus's magic.

Although his visits to the Imperial were few in number and short in duration, Deacon enjoyed every moment with his cousins. Many times he would resolve that this time he would not return to the elven realm, that he would stay with his cousins, seek his own fortune, and take the road he would choose. But then he would think of his mother and her ailing health, left behind to endure without him, and his resolve would fail him.

"Choose your mode of death," said a young, tall elf, with the steel of his blade held at the throat of Deacon. Deacon looked at Lufian with a blank fixed expression. He saw the shining mockery come over Lufian's face. "Do not become discouraged. You may yet find means to defeat me …or has Éomus's training been all for naught?"

Deacon watched him steadily. Then, with a slow motion, he willed a similar weapon to his hand. Lufian gleamed for a moment with pleasure, as if the gesture was made specially to please him. Then he assumed a ready pose. Though it was a pointless exercise, Deacon could never resist a challenge from Lufian, so the two men began to spar.

They were very dissimilar. Lufian was narrow, very thin and fine. Deacon was much heavier and more solid. He had a frictional, invincible kind of strength, whilst Lufian seemed to have a fluid, subtle energy, almost intangible, that worked against the other man with uncanny force, like a spell. He wielded the sword in a tense, fine grip, with quick, dazzling movements, and with such agility and dexterity it was difficult for Deacon to maintain a competitive pace.

With a swift, sudden motion, Lufian flung Deacon's weapon out of his grasp to the ground. Lufian had not broken a sweat, had not a hair out of place, and was clear and white, but Deacon was flushed red and tense. He seemed astonished. Lufian with the tip of his boot flicked the sword up into his hand and offered it back to Deacon. Deacon stood a moment, sorely

affronted; then, with a sudden volcanic speed, he snatched the sword and the contest resumed with greater intensity than before.

Lufian, with a lightning twist of the wrist, sent Deacon's weapon hurtling through the air. "Once again," gloated the elf, his point levelled at Deacon. Both glanced down at the weapon lying far from reach. Swifter than thought, Deacon brought it to his grasp with an outreached hand and threw his shoulder into Lufian's chest.

"It surprises me little that you should have to resort to magic!" snarled Lufian and again knocked it out of Deacon's hand. A slight fatigue showed at last on Lufian's clear brow. Deacon was much more exhausted. He could scarcely breathe any more. He snatched up the hilt of his sword, then, without apology or word of any sort, strode away.

"It's only a game!" called Lufian. He gave the sword a flip in the air and re-caught the handle, a smile crossing his fine lips. In truth, he hardly liked the human, and the sport always gratified his pride.

The sun was beginning to fade, illuminating the woods with the golden hue an autumn sunset lends. Before returning home to his mother, Deacon scrubbed himself clean of the smoke-smudge and grime over his face and arms. Fresh and clean, the evening air cool on his skin, he dashed up the pearlescent stairs leading to the house held aloft by strong branches of the elven-trees. It was a magnificent home with many open rooms, allowing plenty of air and light. Deacon found his mother half-reclining on a long chair beneath a canopy; one look at her and instantly he knew something was wrong. She was listless and pallid in completion. Even the sight of her son failed to rouse her.

A long fever gripped Daenara and left her so weak that there was little hope of full recovery. Her days passed in a state of listlessness sad to witness. Deacon did little else but watch over her, staying at the bedside, as though he could will her back to health, and loathed every moment that did not find him at her side. The elven healers had done all they could for the present. There was nothing for him to do but wait.

Éomus was downstairs. He put himself aside for the moment, leaving Deacon to spend what precious time he had left with his mother. She had declined into a state of unconsciousness, and it was not certain she would recover. Éomus had offered to retrieve Deacon's uncle, but he wanted no one.

In the subdued light of night, Deacon sat by his mother, leaning over her bed. He lay with his cheek on his forearm, his face near to hers. There he waited, motionless, with eyes dark and tender, his countenance grown wan and grim from watching and grief. Her sleeping face was smooth and peaceful. His fingers wandered over her cheek pitifully. He had difficulty convincing himself that he was losing her. Her existence was so very much a part of his own.

"Do not leave me," he whispered, as one murmurs unconsciously in sleep. There were long intervals between the lift of one breath and the next, so that he feared each was the last. He put his fingers to her lips, tinged a strange hue, and shut his eyes tightly to prevent himself from being overcome.

He soon became aware of Éomus standing near at his side. Slowly sitting up, Deacon pinched his fingers into the corners of his eyes and recollected himself before facing him.

"You should get some sleep," Éomus said, resting his hand on his shoulder in a fatherly gesture. "The human frame cannot endure."

Deacon set his jaw against the reference to human frailty but said nothing. Sick with pain he rose feebly. He stood looking down on his mother miserably. He didn't want to leave her, and sleep was not something attainable, but he knew also that Éomus needed to be with her for a time.

Éomus watched the young man whose look was becoming more inverted each passing day and felt deep concern. He loved him as well as his own, but there was a film of ice between them that he could not break through. He could foresee Deacon closing himself off further still. He feared that Deacon would be consumed to the point of self-obliteration and that he would lose him along with Daenara.

“Deacon,” he said, “loss is a natural part of existence. We mustn’t forget those around us who still live.”

“You speak as though she is already dead,” said Deacon quietly, but with burning vehemence.

“No—but you grieve as though she were. And I fear you are in danger of being overcome by dwelling excessively on the pain.”

For a moment the two men stood opposite each other: one tense and resentful, the other grave and aggrieved.

Daenara stirred slightly. Both looked down on her and decided to take their conversation out of the room.

“Profuse sorrowing,” said Éomus the moment he closed the door behind him, “destroys the strength of the body and the health of the mind. And, if you’re not careful, it has an embittering effect on the soul.”

Deacon turned very cold and hard. It was not in his understanding how Éomus could appear so calm at such a time. His eyes remained fixed on Éomus, expressing hurt and anger as he spoke. “How can you carry on with your usual composure and feel nothing, while the woman you claim to love lies dying in your bed. Are you so cold in your perfection!”

The serene brow showed dismay at last. “You have mistaked me all this while,” Éomus said, in a tone of plaintive reproof. “I live with breath as you, feel want, taste the bitterness of grief. I am subjected to these as you! Only I do not understand why you should add further affliction to grief by turning from me.” He stepped toward Deacon but did not touch him, saying with an expression deeply afflicted, “Why are you so anxious to be from me when I need you now the most?”

For the first time Deacon felt a tide of affection for Éomus come over him. Only by the clenching of his jaw and the unshed tears in his eyes could it be told how much moved he was.

“Will she die without regaining consciousness?” he asked at length.

“I am unable to say.”

The two stood in the hallway, momentarily wordless.

“Take comfort,” said Éomus, resting his hand on Deacon as he spoke. “In times such as these we must turn to higher realms for guidance and courage. May they be your strength when sorrows bear down hard upon you.”

Deacon wanted none of it. What were these gods that they should do as they please with the frail beings they created?

The next morning Deacon rose unrested. His whole being seemed beaten down. Coming to stand at his mother’s door, he knocked lightly; hearing Éomus tell him to enter, he pushed it half-open. The morning sun poured in on a made and empty bed, and for an instant his heart ceased to beat. Abruptly he pushed the door fully open.

He saw Éomus standing by the balcony, and sitting there also was his mother. Almost he lost his breath in relief, and as she rose unsteadily, he closed the short distance between them, taking her in his arms. Only for a moment she held him and kissed him, then withdrew to look at his face. She hadn’t much strength to speak and said, trying to sound quite normal, “You look a terrible sight.” She touched her fingertips to his face, rough and unshaven.

“You look beautiful,” he said softly, overcome. She smiled wearily, and he helped her back into the chair. Her movements were unsteady and full of suffering, killing all joy and relief for him. He would have taken the pain himself if he could.

Chapter 13
Ill Informed

In a vast room splendidly furnished, Éomus stood at the side of one of the elven leaders, Aldar, a dignified man with high cheek bones, pale eyes, and flowing silver-grey hair. He said to Éomus, “If my counsel is to be heeded, nothing shall be kept from him. However, the choice lies with you.” Éomus looked a moment as if he might protest, then looking resigned, inclined his head.

Out in the hallway Deacon waited, anxious to know why he had been summoned. Aldar would not have sent for him with reference to any small matter. Nevertheless he retained his composure, his eyes fastened on the door, which was soon opened to him. When he entered he found himself in the presence of the two elven men. Aldar had his back turned, facing the window, while Éomus looked grieved. Deacon stood a moment, waiting for one of them to speak. Great windows displayed a beautiful view of woodland and a magnificent flowing waterfall. However, such a prospect did nothing to dissolve the tension in his heart. He feared they were to inform him of something regarding his mother.

“Perhaps you should seat yourself,” said Aldar.

Deacon did as he was instructed. Both the elven men looked upon him, and there was an intense silence, as if they feared to tell him something crucial. “If there is anything that I hate, it is a mystery,” he said, trying to keep from the angry impatience that deep anxiety breeds.

“You must prepare yourself for distressing tidings,” Éomus told him with dismay.

“Whatever I must bear.”

“It has come to our recent attention,” began Aldar, “that a man whom was long looked upon as being dead …” he paused, seeing the young man’s

face had become very pale.

“My father,” said Deacon, haltingly, and with the intensity of a hate that had been nourished over many years. “He still lives.”

“The council betrayed none of this to any outside their own. It was by mere chance we discovered Luseph’s circumstance.”

Deacon sat silently as the truth slowly came upon him. Black cloud after black cloud shrouded his mind, until his entire countenance was as dark as his thoughts. “Does she know?” he asked, thinking of his mother.

“Yes,” said Éomus.

“Why did she keep it from me?” Deacon asked, though he could guess why. A dangerous thought entered his mind and his whole manner immediately changed, becoming feverishly determined. “Where is he?” he demanded through compressed lips, the heavy beating in his chest making his words uneven. Éomus had a look of misgiving and did not speak. Deacon rose agitatedly to his feet, not liking to have to look up at them. He repeated more forcefully, “Where is he?”

“Luseph chose to retreat to the country for his confinement,” Aldar said calmly. “There, eyes shall seldom see him.”

The elven men were looking at Deacon with closed expressions, and he could not fail to understand that they were disinclined to reveal the location of his father. “You have no confidence in me,” he stated angrily.

“Pause a moment, regain your clarity,” said Éomus, concerned by the feverish flare of Deacon’s eye and the unnatural calm of his manner. He was trying for the appearance of composure, but his whole attitude betrayed deep resentment. Not a muscle of his face relaxed as he spoke.

“What was the punishment before his confinement?”

“His punishment was self-embraced,” said Aldar. “His body was shattered and destroyed to spare your life.” As he spoke, Aldar took himself

over by the window, a gesture intended to quench conversation.

“Which he endangered to begin with,” Deacon said, not letting it be ended there. “It is because of him that she’s dying! He must be punished!” His voice rose a pitch higher when Aldar refused to face him.

Éomus spoke calmly. “He has been punished.”

Deacon’s gaze shifted furiously, and he said, low and hateful, “On his terms. Where is the justice in that?” He looked at Aldar again. “You say he has been punished, but the only person who has the right to say so is the one who suffered the injustice.”

“Self-reproach is the bitterest of all punishments,” said Éomus, maintaining his calm. “Think of the wound to his conscience, the inward suffering and torment he must bear.”

Deacon choked back some harsh words and started for the door.

“Deacon,” Éomus called to him. He paused but did not turn, his back rigid. “Rise above your father’s mistakes, or fall into shadow.”

Deacon’s chin fell to his chest in a kind of angry defeat. Then he left.

He did not return home directly but found an isolated part of the woods, where he stood overwhelmed with rage. A sense of injustice burned within his chest, and he could think of nothing but killing the man who shared his blood but not his spirit. Night fell, and it grew dark all around him. No beast could have torn at him more mercilessly than did his own outrage. He could feel the hate so intensely within him that it must find vent or it would consume him. Then came a voice as soft as the evening breeze, almost whispering his name. Lifting his gaze Deacon winced as though stepping out of dark shadow into strong light. Coming toward him through darkened trees, like a pure ray of light, was Ellendria, whose white radiance and beauty defied all description. She was many years older than her brother and was almost an ethereal being. When elves have accomplished all they can on this plain of existence, they transcend it and resonate with higher realms.

Resplendent in a white flowing gown, Ellendria was the embodiment of grace and stillness. She spoke nothing, but Deacon found her grey eyes directed toward him in a way that gave him the uneasy consciousness she was reading his innermost thoughts. Under her gaze he stood unnaturally, tense and hostile. Feeling his mind intruded upon, he sought to banish all dark reflections.

“Our deeds carry terrible consequences,” Ellendria said. “Be mindful of such thoughts.”

Deacon’s expression darkened. There was hate in it. Her intrusion provoked him beyond all endurance. He did not suspect his thoughts revealed their blackness through his features.

“Should you allow them to persist,” she said, “they will exercise mastery over you, until such that you cannot avoid attempting to fulfil their desire.”

A rage filled slowly within him like some consuming, scathing poison. Before her lofty superiority he felt subdued, bowed, and emasculated. He braved her eyes and said bitterly, “Why should I not? All those years I have wanted to kill him and now I can. Why do you look concerned for me? I will make him suffer and be glad for it. He has brought it upon himself.”

“Those, perhaps, will be the feelings in the first moments, but time will prove the reality of the evil, and then there will be no satisfaction, no rest. The pain will turn so far inward you will begin to lose all sense of self, till there is nothing left of you but a vague memory. Carry that always in your mind.”

A beam of moonlight shed cold silver over her features, and Deacon looked away from her pale eyes. There was a fire in them, but it was the cold, silver–white fire of the moon, which he felt she emitted against him. Her persistent gaze stung him with sharp, cold flames, and he wanted to be away from her; feeling her brilliance would destroy him as light destroys darkness.

“After everything he has done, I’m supposed to let him walk free?” he asked.

“We cannot change the past,” she said, her voice intensely calm.

“No. But we can see that justice is rendered, wound for wound.”

“You do not seek justice. You design to gratify your own will.”

“It matters little what I want,” Deacon said, defeated, his manner deceptively calm. “Éomus will not tell me where Luseph is. Damn him! That miserable coward hides away, while my mother must fight for her life!”

He looked up at Ellendria with eyes black with torture. Not for an instant did her countenance lose its look of grave patience, and a wild desire flared in his chest. He wanted to lay hold of her, hurt her, till he forced a cry of humiliation. His rage became so black and so powerful within him that for an instant he felt as if he might destroy her. He wanted to rend her apart, make her into nothing.

Inwardly Ellendria shrank from him, though he hadn’t so much as advanced a step. It was the felt darkness in him that affected her. She was afraid of him in that moment, and the knowledge of it was both pleasure and shame to him. He stood seething with his poisoned thoughts, and for a moment entertained the wild idea of seizing Ellendria in his hands. Impassioned to the point of intolerable anger, with no outlet, he was past the point where he could risk standing here another moment. With visible effort he suppressed the half-mad desire to force from her some sign of emotion, anything but this white-cold perfection, and made his way home.

Quietly he stole into the house like a guilty shadow. Inside he moved stealthily for fear of disturbing his mother, but she was already awake and waiting for him, cast in subdued light. He was passing the doorway when she called his attention to herself.

“You’ve been gone a long while,” she said, pensively.

“I know. I’m sorry.” He drifted into the room. He could tell from her expression that she was aware he knew about his father. Wearily, Deacon rubbed his lip. He could see that she wanted to talk. He glanced back at the door that would lead him to his solitude, which he desired more than company at this moment, then inhaled deeply, resigning himself. Dragging up a chair, Deacon sat opposite his mother, his knees on either side of hers.

“So you know,” he said plainly. He did not want to be impatient with her. Waiting for her to say something, he sat uneasy. Not once did she lift her gaze from his hand that she held in her own.

“I don’t know if it is within me to forgive him,” she said weakly, passing her fingers over the scar on his palm. “But you have to understand it was never his intention to hurt you as he did.”

Deacon saw, from her face and from the nervous clasp of her hands, that she was deeply distressed, and took her hands to still them. “It’s not myself that I care about—” His mother’s gaze lifted to meet his, and upon seeing her comprehending grief, he was unable to finish the sentence. His expression hardened, and with a startling suddenness he was angry again. “He should have been protecting you!” He rose sharply to his feet, tearing his hand away from hers. “Why is everyone protecting him!”

Daenara sank back in her chair and looked up at Deacon with helpless and aggrieved eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, inflicting a brutal rubbing on his face. “I’m tired. I will get to bed.”

Deacon took his leave with a brief kiss on his mother’s lips. Not attempting to keep him further, Daenara remained awhile, her heart aching. She could feel him losing himself to hate.

From the balcony that extended from his room, Deacon looked out over the woods illumined by the soft glow of night-lamps, which shone like silver stars in the trees. It was a beautiful and serene atmosphere. Down below he could see elves carrying hanging lamps, singing their hymns,

while drifting with such royal sagacity throughout the peaceful trees. Elves, requiring only a few hours' repose, sang long into the night.

Deacon inhaled deeply. Certain flowers here only bloomed at night under the moon and filled the air with a heavy, pungent perfume, which seemed so a part of the darkness it was as though he breathed the night itself.

The woods here were elegant and opulent, but Deacon was hardened against their beauty. He was living in what many believed perfection, yet he had a persistent sensation that behind all that beauty and flowers and appearance of harmony and happiness, lay treachery. Nature had become his antagonist. Living among the elves, Deacon was acutely aware of his mother's and his own mortality and lived bitterly beneath the shadow of time. The elves were blind. They did not know what it was to age and die.

Far from these woods there was a tree, an immense and ancient tree, that Deacon had been told of over the years. It was said that this tree was the physical manifestation of life's essence, haunted by the elemental spirits that govern all of nature. They could not be seen but felt intuitively by those who allowed it. Their bodies, made of an etheric substance, could not be killed. However, with disastrous consequences, their connection to one another could be severed. The source of their connection was this great and tremendous tree. If it was to be destroyed they would be separated from one another. Nature would despair. Sometimes, when his fury was roused against the elves, dangerous thoughts entered his mind. Deacon indulged his fancy but did not for an instant believe he would go through with such an unforgivable act.

Chapter 14
An Elven Celebration

In a moonlit garden a graceful gathering of elves came together to celebrate the earth. Otherworldly music, wistfully arresting and enchanting, was carried on the breeze and filled the woods with its lilting allure. Neighbouring elves from Myrthwood and Evandale had joined the divertissement, and the garden and entire surrounding woods were filled with elegant, informal gatherings of those who had not seen one another for long intervals. Ellendria and Aldar were also there. They maintained a certain manner that was owing to their station but otherwise faded in with the many others.

Daenara sat by the edge of an elegant fountain, overflowing with water glistening like liquid silver. Éomus was at her side. She wore a lovely gown the colour of primrose. Not far from her Deacon sat, dark-clad and handsome, on stone steps that led down into the garden where little fire-flies hovered, glowing gold in the night. Throughout the garden a sumptuous banquet was laid out on platters of fine silver. Serving-maidens presented themselves when needed, keeping the glasses flowing with wine.

Sitting alone, forearms resting on his knees, Deacon was withdrawn, distant and watchful. The object of his attention was Mariwen, who was in the handsome company of Valdur and Aldur, the sons of Aldar and Ellendria. Mariwen was quite different to those she gathered with. Her face sweet and luminous, she was like the glory of morning, while they had the grace of evening. Every one of her movements, the way she put her lips to the fine rim of the glass, and the way she touched Valdur’s arm, Deacon watched. His face was passive and expressionless, but he suffered.

Occasionally his gaze would shift to his mother and he would feel glad. She looked at peace and comfortable, listening to the elves’ lilting intonations, which seemed to bathe her soul in their beauty. She sank a little against Éomus, and he caressed her hand and arm with the lightest brush of

fingertips. Deacon grimaced to himself and turned his gaze aside. He had an unfathomable aversion to Éomus touching his mother.

All the elven children, who were not very childish, played about the garden, and Deacon was obliged to move his glass of wine from the step several times so the children could pass. It happened often enough that Deacon finally decided to abandon his seat and stood up. The moment he did it seemed Mariwen suddenly noticed his existence, for she immediately looked his way, and with a sweet smile came forward, weaving through the crowd unfalteringly to get to him. He stood watching her come toward him and felt a flush of heat. He thought her love the most precious a man could possess.

She took his hand and led him unhesitatingly toward the company she had momentarily abandoned. Although Deacon would rather she had led him into the woods so they might be alone, he yielded to her will, half-dazed. The haunting music ever drifted through the air, but a sweeter music played in his ears, and he was blind to all else but the maiden drawing him. It seemed to Deacon that the party's spirit had affected her, for she was exquisitely interested in him, glancing often over her shoulder, eyes adance with the sparkling lights of the stars.

Deacon came back to a sense of himself, to find he was welcomed into Mariwen's gathering of friends. He did not share their gracious enthusiasm, and for a moment the gentle group was oppressed by his dominating presence, conscious of his cynicism. Condemned to their society, he stood, silent and inscrutable, but he had the loveliest of consolations. Mariwen was at his side. Occasionally he looked down at her hand that hung so near to his. It lay there so near, yet out of his reach. He wanted to take it up and claim her and have every right to her.

The conversation at last broke off. Mariwen, leaving with Aldur, asked Deacon to join them. He declined, remaining where he was, hoping she would remain with him. She chose instead to leave, and Deacon felt a stab of jealousy. To keep the indifference in his attitude was a challenge.

As the evening drew on Deacon saw that his mother had become excessively weary, the bloom worn off her cheek, and his heart grew sore.

Her frailty was a cruel, piteous contrast to the undimishing beauty of the elves. As he looked at his mother with troubled eyes, she happened to look over at him and gave a soft, reassuring smile. Therein was his stability, comfort, and sustaining warmth. He felt a flush of love for her and returned the smile with his own.

The hour was late, the minutes dragging on endlessly. Deacon sat with his hands hanging lifelessly between his knees, head down, absent and engrossed in thoughts that were soon forgotten. His attention was captured by several elven maidens who drifted subtly into the garden like mist of the moon. They carried with them white flowing veils. Their lovely forms were draped in pale gowns, so light it seemed moonlight itself clothed them.

They did not, as any human maiden would, observe with pleasure the effect of their beauty, but were devoted to the pleasures of dance, scarcely aware that they were not alone. The night air became alive and vibrant. To the enchanting music the maidens danced, their slender limbs like branches swaying in the evening breeze, gracefully manipulating the veils, which seemed an extension of themselves. There was a graceful fluidity of movement in the dance, entrancing and mysterious.

As though caught in a dream, in a sort of mesmeric state, Deacon watched the unison of flowing femininity. Their beauty affected him subtly, like the night air he breathed, and seemed to awaken his blood. They had his attention, yet they had no possession of his heart. They were vague and unreal to his eyes, too faultless and devoid of any flaw, too utterly elusive. He had been with women of his own kind. They had not been so nearly flawless, or changelessly divine, but they were tangible. He could submerge himself in them and feel responsive warmth and life.

Deacon was so immersed in his occupation, he had not seen his mother retire. When finally he turned his attention, he saw the seat that previously occupied her was empty. He saw Éomus lead her away. She looked unwell, her face white and her movements unsteady. She seemed strangely remote and clinging in his arms.

Deacon didn’t follow directly but remained for the end of the dance. Later, he started up the stairs to his home and paused mid-step. He saw on

the balcony his mother standing with Éomus, clasped against him, their words low and intimate. In his arms her whole aspect and spirit seemed so at peace and in accord with his, her face so unblemished, that Deacon hoped it might be the promise of returning health. Yet a doubt, a vague feeling of disquiet came to him. In his soul rose despair. He felt weak and rested his hand on the rail to support himself, his heart failing.

Éomus bent and kissed Daenara. The closeness of body and spirit and the everlasting tenderness shared between them was apparent in that moment, and Deacon felt suddenly moved. Swiftly and unnoticed he drew away from the house as if it were a sacred temple in which he had no right to enter. He ventured back into the woods, wandering wherever his will would take him. Coming to a bridge that was serene in the evening light, Deacon's step faltered and his pulse quickened. Mariwen was there by herself. In her he saw promise of satisfying his discontent. He could go to her in pieces and she would make him whole.

He quietly joined her. They stood together, looking out into the luminous night. It held little charm for him, but she was entranced. To her clear sight the night was more beautiful. Down below water shimmered and sparkled. Though he was very near he felt as though he was looking at her from a thousand miles away. Her eyes looked far out, lost in a maiden's dreamy reverie. "It is wonderous, is it not?" She always spoke of evenings most sacredly.

"Yes," he said but found it impossible to fix his attention upon the view, whilst beside him was this angelic form. Never before had she looked so lovely to him. Bathed in soft light she possessed an unworldly beauty. She glanced over her shoulder as she spoke.

"It is unfortunate the most beautiful part of the night is often missed by humans, lying in their beds."

Deacon hardly attended to her words, merely absorbing her presence. He stood a moment undecided, looking at her adoringly, his heart filled with a hot pain and yearning, so that his entire chest was one painful ache. Hesitantly, he raised his hand to smooth down her hair, which fell in golden waves to her waist, but let the hand drop quietly back down to his side. She

did not see. He resented this divided attention, jealous that she could be so content within her own mind, feeling as though she had wandered into a warm enclosure and left him standing out in the cold, doomed to be always on the outside looking in, always waiting, always restraining himself.

He was silent and disappointed. She held herself aloof and beyond him. He wanted her to say something meaningful, to caress him, but she would do neither. Done with waiting, he let his hand stray over to hers on the railing and cover it affectionately. He leaned against her, pressed so very close that she could feel his body, the inert weight of his soul full upon her, bringing her down. He could feel her resistance but was encouraged she had not withdrawn. He stole his hand softly round her waist, pressing her more against him. He was tired of subtle and decided to commit himself irrevocably.

“Do you wish to be with me?” he murmured in her hair, his tone soft and appealing. He was breathing heavily. “I know a place we can go.”

She withdrew and saw that he was looking down on her with eyes that spoke of a necessity and urge of the blood no woman could misunderstand. Bending his face very near to hers, he was at the point where in the next moment he would have sought her mouth, but she instead spoke. At the first sound of her voice he flinched, though not visibly.

“Look not to me for companionship,” she said sorrowfully, but with a reproach to the sound of her voice that angered him. For a moment he stood breathless. His hand remained on her, but the caress had gone out of it. She could feel his hurt and unhappiness and knew not what she was to do with him. She was hastening away when he caught her back.

“Why?” he asked, perplexed. “I have not met your equal,” he said, intimately, believing perhaps she required reassurance of his devotion. She was unreceptive, and he began to fear now that she was capable only of pleasuring in things of the mind and would never receive him. “You will not have me?” he said, half-tenderly, half-bitterly, something fretful and appealing in his voice. “You do not desire me?”

It was his final effort. He raised his hand toward her lips, but she gently imprisoned it in both her hands. She would not take pleasure in him beyond common discourse. Her heart did not lie with him, therefore neither would her body. Elven kind were deeply committed to those they would make their own, and sought companions who desired to spend the full span of eternity with them, rather than those who would inconsequentially pass them by, giving a fleeting glimpse of joy.

She spoke gravely. “I desire that you should not suffer any hurt or illness and that you should know happiness.”

Slowly, he disengaged his hand. She had now made it clear that, whatever he was seeking, he would not find it in her. As she touched his face he strained away, feeling now that she had played with him.

She left him, downhearted and angry, standing alone in the middle of the bridge. The cold light of the moon cast lonely prospects into view, and he felt a vast emptiness all around him and in him.

Chapter 15
The Darkening Of Deacon

When Deacon returned home he was grateful the house was dark and silent in sleep. Éomus and his mother had retired, and he went directly to his own bed. There he lay motionless on his back, conscious only of the great ache in his chest. There was no help for it. This pain was not due to injured vanity but the knowledge that the woman in whom he had placed all his hopes was lost to him forever. Soon his thoughts and emotions became numbed through excessive pain, and finally he succumbed to sleep.

That night in his bed Deacon struggled as though entangled in a hateful dream. It was the same dream that had come upon him often enough. Fighting his way through a vine-entangled wood, with hanging thorn trees, he groped his way toward his mother. The vines had caught her, twining about her wrists and ankles, clinging to her neck, climbing up even to her lips, they cluttered and choked her throat, so that she could not breath. She would be taken from him. He tried to get to her, but try as he would, the tangled mass held him. He fought desperately, wildly. He could not get to her. Finally he broke loose and emerged. Sharp thorns scratched and cut him, even as he tore them from her.

Deacon struggled into consciousness. His thoughts went immediately to his mother, accompanied by an indescribable urgency to go to her. Though he never believed he had inherited his mother's gift of foresight, this dream had impressed on him feelings of dread so strong he couldn't ignore them.

Deacon came to an abrupt stop outside of his mother's chamber doors, trying to decide whether he should disturb them. He had almost talked himself out of his concerned state of mind, but the dread still possessed him. Finally he tapped softly on the door. He was surprised when it opened immediately. Éomus with the gravest expression ushered him in, and he saw his mother lying on the recliner.

Deacon approached her hesitantly. She looked frightening—her face strained and ghastly, with eyes that rolled about without recognition and were never once brought to focus. Her mouth, slightly opened, seemed to gasp feebly for breath, her lips a ghastly hue. Deacon knelt down on one knee, taking her hand.

“Mother, I’m here,” said the young man in a choking voice, but she was unconscious of his presence. Momentarily her gaze passed over Deacon, but the sight of him did not rouse or comfort her. Their connection was already broken. Gripped with a numb fear, he could only rub the back of her hand aimlessly. He was helpless to revive her, and he feared what was happening to her body. It seemed she was invaded by some cruel, corrosive evil that was destroying her internally. It was out of his control. Something he could not fight against was taking her away. A helpless terror was rising in him. He glanced back over his shoulder at Éomus, but grief gripped his throat and he was unable to speak.

“The healer has been sent for,” Éomus said, knowing what Deacon’s eyes were asking for.

Deacon was only vaguely aware of Éomus standing at his side. Everything around him had dissolved from his vision and become blurry. There was only her. He clutched at her hand frantically and placed it on his lips. “Do not leave me here alone.” He spoke through clenched teeth, so fiercely it would have been taken for anger if not for the break in his voice and the suffering in his eyes.

The healer was not long in arriving. He did not go to Daenara, but stood at a little distance, watching with a grieved expression that frightened and frustrated Deacon.

“Why do you stand there!” he cried over his shoulder. “Help her!”

The healer exchanged concerned glances with Éomus, then settled his gaze heavily on the disconsolate young man, still clasping his mother’s hand, but standing now to face them, a fierceness in his bearing. It seemed a painfully long pause before the healer spoke, and Deacon grew anxious and perplexed at his delay.

“It has come time now,” the healer said slowly, with all the regret one would feel in such a position, “that we no longer prolong her life, but her death.”

Deacon at once took his meaning, and looking from under dark brows, said, dangerously calmly, “That is not your choice to make.” He trembled visibly now. “Do not let her die.”

Éomus and the healer remained fixed, with no sign of yielding. Releasing his mother, Deacon took several impassioned steps toward them. “I have practised your ways. I have done everything you have ever asked of me.” Angry tears flew into his eyes. “Now help her!”

For a moment the room was deathly quiet but for the sound of the rasped and laboured breathing of the dying woman. Anger suddenly gave way to grief, and in utter desperation, Deacon turned to Éomus. “Don’t let her die,” he pleaded. Éomus was torn with an evident conflict within himself. “Éomus,” said Deacon, an agonized appeal. “Help her. Please.”

There was a collapse in his voice, and all the pride had left his features, replaced with a look of such bitter grief it cut Éomus deeply. He looked down at the strong hand that clasped his arm and said to Deacon, “Wait outside for the moment, and I will help your mother.” His voice was so low it was barely audible. Deacon was rendered stunned momentarily; then feeling some sense of relief, he nodded. A look akin to admiration was in his expression as he looked to Éomus with thankfulness.

“All right,” was Deacon’s breathless reply. With great reluctance to leave her, he obeyed, casting a mistrustful and angered glance toward the healer as he left.

Dragging in long, restorative breaths, Deacon walked down a little way from the house, pacing like a caged wolf, suffering the torment of inaction. Though it felt an eternity, he had not long been here before being approached by a young elven healer. The gravity of his expression alerted Deacon before words were even spoken. He set off at a dead run, tearing up the pearlescent stairs to his mother. Pale eyes were turned on him the moment he entered, elven healers gathered round the bed, all looking

toward him with grave expressions. He stood panting and stunned. He was too late. His mother lay lifeless.

Caught in a grief too complex to articulate, Éomus could only look to Deacon with commiserating eyes, filled with infinite sadness. He thought now, upon seeing Deacon's face—knowing he was too late—that perhaps he had made a mistake in sending him out, but he knew also that Deacon would have interfered.

Deacon did not go over to his mother but stood motionless, vaguely conscious of hands being laid on him consolingly and voices expressing their sorrow. His face remained closed and set. No tears came to his relief, and without uttering a single word, he turned and left the room.

In the grove where the elves gathered to mourn Daenara, Deacon was not to be seen. From the shadows where he stood, he could hear the elves singing, a strange blending of exultation and sadness. Their accents were pure and perfect, like crystal touched by moonlight. The powerful notes of their harmonizing reverberated throughout Deacon's being and continued steadily to build in intensity with each painful throb, until an acute pain rose from the farthest recess of his soul and gripped his throat so tight he could not draw an easy breath.

It became almost impossible to contain the swell of emotions, expanding, till he felt his heart would rupture inside of him. His eyes strained painfully under the pressure of tears denied their release. He felt as though something vital had been taken from him, never to be returned. The elfmaidens' crystal voices thrilled along the cords to his heart and lacerated it with their perfect pitch. With a bleeding heart, Deacon stole silently into the night.

Much later, Éomus became deeply concerned for Deacon. He had not seen him in many hours and ventured out into the woods to find him. There he was, leaning with his shoulder against a tree, his arms clasped round his body, head down-bent. He looked as if he had been standing in that same position a long time, and Éomus thought he never looked more alone and never more estranged. He did not lift his face at Éomus's approach. Finally he spoke in a mixture of question and accusation.

“It was never your intention to save her,” he said, his voice strangled in his throat. “Was it?” He raised his eyes to meet Éomus with an unswavering enmity.

It was a moment before Éomus could find his voice. “It was her time,” he answered.

Nodding silently, Deacon dropped his chin again, pressing his lips shut. Tears gathered in his eyes, and he turned his head sharply to hide them. The release of emotion in company hurt him as it hurts a man. He suddenly looked up. “Damn you.” He choked with rage. “Damn you and the rest of your kind.”

Éomus stood disconsolate, not daring to approach Deacon, who had returned to his former posture against the tree, only not with a desolate misery in his bearing, but a fierce animosity, a stiffness in the neck and shoulders of a man on the brink of violence.

“It was not a falsehood when I said I would help her,” said Éomus. “She did not die suffering.”

Deacon understood now Éomus had used magic to either ease her suffering or perhaps to end her misery swiftly. Either way he cursed himself for leaving her alone with the traitors.

There was a long interval of unbroken silence, before Éomus said, “I will leave you now and let you seek counsel.”

“I care nothing for your deities,” Deacon muttered. An injustice still burned within him. “Tell me. How is it that you can worship them so blindly when they will permit a man who could not be more loathsome, more contemptible, to live and breathe, while my mother lays cold in the earth?”

Éomus knitted his brow and said bleakly, “Our minds are finite, and our understanding has limits.”

Deacon sneered at that unsatisfactory answer and again looked away.

“This world has many failings,” said Éomus. “But take comfort that it is a temporal existence and preparation for what is to come.” He paused a moment, feeling he was failing Deacon. He could not bring him comfort. “The future will hold joys for you, now unseen and unknown. Do not let the tears in your eyes blind you to them.” Deacon shifted slightly at his words but would not not look up. “You may go see her yet. We’ll not say our last goodbye till your family is here to take part.”

“I will not be here,” said Deacon.

For a considerable time neither spoke. Then Éomus said, in grievously low tones, “You will for the rest of your life mourn her earthly presence. But would you, if the power were in your hands, take her from the joyous regions in which she now resides and have her return?”

Éomus waited, looking at Deacon helplessly. Deacon remained silent. He would not look at him. Éomus left with reluctance. One’s courage is tested to its utmost limits when left alone in grief, but he felt there was nothing more he could say at present.

Chapter 16
The Dawn Of A New Beginning

Numbed and disconnected from any thought or feeling, Deacon lay wide awake. Thankfully, it was to be his last night in the house. Éomus had offered, almost implored, Deacon to let him send somebody to inform Thaemon of his sister's passing, but Deacon insisted that he go himself.

The dawn of a new morning came. After the heavy, unrefreshing sleep of exhaustion, Deacon left the house early. Dew clung to the foliage, and the air had a crisp chill. The moment he set foot outside, Deacon grimaced. The brilliance of the streaming morning sunshine seemed to mock his anguish. Swiftly, and with bowed head, he went through the woods. None of the elves spoke. Silently he passed, and it was as death itself had passed, blackening their realm.

He went directly to retrieve a sturdy beast for the journey. There was a fierce black thing for which he always had an affection, a beautiful mare, well-groomed and strong. With committed intentness he saddled her up. His bags, packed and ready to go, lay at his feet.

"You are determined to do this?" He heard Éomus ask from behind, disappointment in the tone.

Deacon briefly glanced back and answered tersely, "Yes." His mood was tense and dangerous. He hadn't wanted to see Éomus before leaving. He hadn't wanted to see anyone.

"How long until you are to return?"

"I will remain in the Imperial for a time, so don't fear the earth has swallowed me whole, when I do not return directly."

Both men turned their heads when they heard approaching footsteps. Coming toward them through the trees was Mariwen, her eyes full of care

as she looked upon Deacon, who refused to look at her. She stood, uncertain, almost timid, as he aggressively and mechanically readied his horse.

“How can you leave Éomus at such a time?” she asked, a slight reproach hidden in her attitude.

“I’m certain he will bear his burden better than I do mine,” said Deacon. “After all, the elves have always been beyond the ailment of human sentiment.” He turned his face to Éomus as he spoke, his expression leaving no doubts to his meaning.

Then he turned back to Mariwen. He could not bear her presence; it made him feel insane. “Why are you still here?” he asked, suddenly showing some frustration and only just now looking her in the eye, his anger faltering briefly when he saw the hurt in them. He turned from her, stooping down. He hauled his bag up onto the horse and fastened it, trying to remain blind to them both.

“Deacon,” she pleaded, drawing forward.

He grew still on a sudden, both hands on the back of the horse, and said, “Do not stand near to me. I cannot breathe the air where you are.” He kept his face partly averted but spoke so vindictively, she stepped back, stunned as though he had physically stuck her.

Éomus reached a gentle hand and drew her to his side, not trusting Deacon in his present state of mind. Mariwen could scarcely refrain from tears, looking at Deacon as if she thought him very much changed.

“I will look forward to your return,” Éomus said confidently as Deacon mounted, but Éomus knew that he had no intention of returning. Deacon dug his heels brutally into the beast’s side and set off at full speed, without so much as looking back.

Deacon’s mind was emptied by the rhythmic pounding of hooves on the ground. The vast landscape passed him by monotonously. Dark clouds enshrouded the sun, and a dull shadow came over. The atmosphere was in

motion, a deep restlessness. A damp wind stung his face as he went through a shroud of misty rain, but he rode on unfalteringly. There was a deep rumble of distant thunder, and Deacon spurred his horse to go faster, as if he could outrun the impending storm.

Into the Imperial city, the city that never sleeps, Deacon finally arrived. He had ridden strong, barely stopping along the way, but now was so tired that dark circles showed through the bronze under his eyes. He made his way to his uncle's house, the same house where he had spent many nights in his childhood.

* * *

In a stone courtyard with a well-cultivated garden, prim with its formal beds of flowers, two young men sparred with swords. They were both dressed with a great deal of care and taste. They had sandy blonde hair, and their complexions, fair by nature, had been burned brown by the sun. Both were handsome in a well-bred way and looked considerably alike. Their sister lounged on a garden-bench, watching them. They were not well-matched in their sparring. Cedrik was by far the superior swordsman, his movements more contained and controlled and with a subtlety which lends itself to accuracy. At only twenty-four, he moved and fought with the experience of one many years older. So exceptional was his skill that he had been accepted into the Imperial legion and had served for the past seven years. He bore an unblemished reputation, always conscious of his father's expectations of him as eldest son.

Derek fought like an artful fighter but one who in his rage forgets all his skill and fights recklessly. He did not have the patience and perseverance to perfect his technique. He had a convinced assurance about himself that was almost remorseless, and he was tireless in efforts to project a great deal of masculinity, yet for a young man he was quite pretty, with full lips and lively blue eyes. He was well-known as a bit of a scoundrel but had some fine redeeming qualities. He also had a certain charm the women adored, and he adored them.

"You leave your heart open to me too often," Cedrik said to his brother. "I could kill you easily, which I might have considered had we not the same

mother. You’re a disgrace!” he said in good-natured raillery.

Brielle called to Derek, “You’re like a great ox—charging in like that! Show some finesse!”

His sister’s remark flared Derek’s temper, and he fought all the more recklessly, swinging his sword wildly and making lunges clumsy from fatigue. Cedrik laughed. “I swear you would make an ox seem a model of agility,” he said, ducking swiftly as Derek’s sword slashed wildly over the top of his head.

“He’d be better off fighting with his head. He might actually do some damage!” said Brielle. Derek’s teasing could put her in a fit of rage, and she enjoyed getting back her own in a subject most sensitive to him.

Hot and intent, Derek made no retort. They continued to spar passionately when, without warning, both swords were torn from their hands and dropped like leaden weights onto the stones with a loud clang. They were both stunned, staring blankly at one another; then they heard a familiar voice call to them. “Don’t injure yourselves!”

They recognized it immediately and, glancing up, saw Deacon coming toward them. Despite his weariness from travel, he had an easiness and a grace, a token of his elven heritage. The elven-made cloak he wore was a deep green—the colour of dead-green foliage. It looked thick and durable, yet possessed the softness of the finest fibres. Under his arm he carried two swords.

The brothers half-ran to met him, followed at a much slower pace by Brielle, who always had the merest hint of animosity towards Deacon. She loved him, really, but was a little afraid of him, and he had the habit of getting her brothers into mischief.

Cedrik and Derek clasped Deacon’s arms and shoulders in excitement. None of them were compelled to embrace, but they huddled together, happily engaged in banter and good cheer, despite the strangeness of separation between them.

Deacon stood back and looked at his cousins with fondness. “It must take a long time to dress in the morning,” he commented, looking at all the buttons in their attire. He said to Cedrik, “You’ve gained some weight.”

“It’s called brawn,” replied Cedrik with the quickness of good humour.

Deacon half-smiled, then said, “And you, Derek, you’ve outgrown your brother almost by an entire foot.”

“And he does not tire of reminding me,” said Cedrik, putting his hand on his brother’s back.

Here Deacon gifted them with the swords.

Expressing a little sigh of appreciation, Cedrik took the sword firmly in both his hands. It was light but exceedingly sharp and felt good in his grip. It was a finely crafted weapon, the blade inlaid skilfully with decorative silver. Derek ran his hands appreciatively over the fine detail.

Just as much care had been taken with the bracelet Deacon had crafted for Brielle. The young men parted to make way when she approached nearer. Deacon smiled down at her affectionately. She was tiny and delicate. She could have fit in his arms twice. With her dark hair and sharp features, she looked more like his sister than she did her own brothers. Looking up at him, she chewed on the side of her cheek, uncertain as to whether she should embrace him. Deacon’s manner was less restrained when with his cousins, but he maintained a certain reserve that verged on coldness.

She was reluctant to accept the gift he offered, but a glance of the handsome eyes, and a small imploring gesture, had her, in spite of herself, holding out a wrist for him to clasp the bracelet.

“What mischief do you intend getting these fools into now?” she asked with a wry smile, fondling the pretty jewel at her wrist.

“Actually, I’m here to see your father,” Deacon said. His voice was thoroughly self-assured. “Is he about?”

The siblings exchanged glances.

“He’s in the house,” said Cedrik with a slight frown. He squeezed his sister’s hand she had placed in his. The three of them followed Deacon up to the house.

Inside Deacon had faded feelings of familiarity that left him with the nostalgic, unsettling feeling of being almost home, all the more cruel for having been so close. Although he was welcomed warmly as one of the family, he still felt he was a stranger, misplaced.

Thaemon was as he had been in youth, handsome and dignified. He rose from his seat when he saw his sons and his daughter with their visitor enter the room. Deacon did not want any formalities or ceremony. Almost passionless, he told of his mother’s passing.

Thaemon had half-expected this news. It did not lessen the pain. For a long interval he stood with his hand resting heavily on Deacon’s shoulder, his head bowed. He was trying for composure and would not speak until he had obtained it. Deacon waited immovably. There was no shade of emotion, nothing perceptible of the grief and anger struggling in him.

“You have seen your grandmother?” Thaemon asked, at length.

“I will leave that for you.”

“Éomus must be struggling.” Thaemon swept a hand over his eyes. “When will the ceremony take place?”

“The moment you arrive,” answered Deacon, with an odd note.

“You will not be attending?”

Deacon glanced up darkly.

“That’s unfortunate,” said Thaemon, leaving it at that.

Cedrik stood back with his brother and sister, none of them speaking a word. From the next room Clara came in, evidently having heard. She was

not perturbed in the slightest by Deacon's removed nature and put her arms about him. Deacon stiffened at the openness of affection, but he didn't mind. Slowly, he allowed himself to become enveloped in her tenderness. He hid his face against her shoulder and wrapped his arms tight about her waist. Closing his eyes he took a moment free from grief and weariness. She smelled sweetly and vaguely of perfume.

She so well supplied a mother's part it became a substitute more painful for its nearness, since it mocked Deacon with a false resemblance to his mother. Her warmth, her softness, each touch of which seemed perfect, became so unsatisfactory as to cause positive misery. He stood several moments, clinging to the cruelty of her tender sympathies.

Then, feeling overcome, he stood back, and she brushed her hand over his forehead, saying, "You look utterly spent. Let me fix you something to eat." She had such an anxious mother's voice that he felt he would fall to pieces if she kept fussing over him as she did, but he compelled himself to stay in command, looking down at her with a tight-lipped smile.

"You know you are welcomed to stay here for as long as you please," said Thaemon, laying his hand on Deacon as he spoke.

Deacon had arrived without the intention of staying even a night, but his cousins persuaded him into remaining a few days. Thaemon and Clara had taken Brielle with them to attend the burial, while Cedrik and Derek insisted on staying behind. It did not take the boys long to convince Deacon to get out of the house and go to the tavern. It had been so long since Deacon had had ale that he almost lost his taste for it, but he needed to get out.

As they entered the tavern, they were eyed with a certain amount of suspicion from the few number of patrons—their gazes lingering on Deacon. No emotion is more fixed in common minds than dislike and fear of anything unusual, and Deacon, having spent most of his life in the elven realm had acquired an indefinable otherness.

The young men stationed themselves at table in a quiet corner. Cedrik ordered three mugs of ale, which the girl brought promptly. They each put

the frothy drink to their lips but after only a single sip, placed it down again. Their tankards sitting untouched on the table, they sat in heart-stricken silence, surveying the laughter and activity as though it was impossible for them to participate.

“I’m travelling to Cheydon,” Deacon said, as though it had been working in his mind all the while.

The brothers looked up at the unexpectedness of the statement. Something was final and determined in his tones.

“What’s in Cheydon?” asked Cedrik.

“There is a mages guild there,” replied Deacon.

“Why not apply for a scholarship here?” said Cedrik.

“Because it takes too much time to apply here,” Deacon said with some irritation, not at Cedrik, but at the thought of going through the university’s formalities and procedures.

“It will take no longer than your travel time to Cheydon,” Cedrik said. “And here you can have the benefit of superior resources.”

Deacon, annoyed, took a sip of his drink. The truth was he had no intention of going through any official institution. He wanted access to scrolls and books, and unlike here, the Cheydon spell book emporium was open to the public. Cheydon had a reputation among magical institutions as being far more lenient and observing far fewer rules and regulations than any other place. Things went on there that the university frowned at, but the city was so remote it was often overlooked.

Deacon’s driving purpose was to discover the secrets of divining, quickly, and in his own manner. It was the only way he thought to find his father. He would not share his purpose with Cedrik, knowing no good would come out of it. Too many questions he was not prepared to answer would be brought up.

“I don’t want to be confined to the university’s rigorous schedules and formalities,” he said finally. “I will be glad to just spend some time on my own, studying as I please.”

“When do you mean to return to the elves?” asked Cedrik, taking a sip of ale.

“I don’t mean to,” said Deacon without looking up, bitterness in his voice.

Cedrik left it alone. Deacon’s tone left no room for argument. His mind was made up and he wanted to leave for Cheydon as soon as possible.

In spite of himself, Deacon spent several days more at his cousins home. It did him good. He seemed able to breath more freely here. He had regained his usual clean, clear-cut look. His bronze skin was warm with a healthful glow, and his eyes were clear and alert, but not for an instant did he forget his purpose. Restless to move on, he soon informed his keepers that he would be leaving the next morning.

It was early when Deacon left the house. He was walking down toward the stables outside the city, when Cedrik caught up with him. Breathless still from running, Cedrik said, “I’m going with you.”

Deacon stopped dead, and turning, was about to speak, when he spotted Derek from over Cedrik’s shoulder, coming up the rear like a hopeless laggard. Slung over his shoulder was a hazardously large bag. Deacon glanced at Cedrik almost fearfully, and said, “No.” Then he looked down and saw that he also carried a bag.

“We’re no longer merely cousins, but brothers,” said Cedrik. “Trust me to stand by you in misfortune.” He slapped Deacon on the back, giving way to a masculine embrace.

Soon Derek arrived. He yawned and shook his head as if to gain some senses and said, “Can we first get some coffee?”

“You can get some when you return home. You’re not coming with me,” said Deacon. “Neither of you.”

But neither budged.

“Sorrow such as this was never meant to be borne alone,” said Cedrik stubbornly. Deacon knew that they would have their way. A bright smile broke over Derek’s face, knowing they had won.

Chapter 17
Way To Cheydon

Derek was more than half-disappointed when they passed the first inn. “But think of the coffee,” he protested, trying to sound persuasive. “Hot, smooth, sweet!” Glancing backward from his horse, he watched the inn get further away. Cedrik and Deacon ignored him. Both feared it was to be a long journey. They had not yet left the Imperial region, and already Derek was whining.

Cheydon was a considerable journey, and Deacon seemed determined to get there in the least amount of time possible, pushing the horses as hard as he could without killing them. He scarcely spoke along the way, his mind preoccupied with thoughts he was unwilling to share. Cedrik and Derek could not help but notice his focused intent. Almost they thought him inhuman. He had incredible endurance and wanted to keep going, even when they were near to falling off their horses from exhaustion. Besides his Riven blood, something else was driving him forward, some hidden determination that made Cedrik uneasy. He felt his cousin was not being entirely straight-forward with him.

“Say nothing to him,” Cedrik said to his brother, when he saw the temptation to ask questions and involve himself.

“He’s damn-well possessed!” said Derek, as loudly as present company would permit.

“Leave it be.”

“You leave it be,” said Derek. “I’m going to speak, talk some sense into him.”

“You haven’t any to spare. Leave it.”

“Fine!” So far it had not been an adventure as Derek had hoped, but proved monotonous. They had been riding relentlessly, and without any of the roguery and daredevilry that redeems the discomfort of journeying.

Finally Cedrik and Derek joined forces against Deacon and convinced him they needed rest. Just off the road, in among the trees, they stopped. It was not very cheery, the three of them so tired they did not spare a moment for speaking. Each went directly to his own bed and slept under the stars.

Sometime during the night Deacon was awoken by a faint sound. Alert in an instant, he lay covertly watching the intruder. It was a little hobgoblin. The ears were pointed, far more prominent than any elven ears, and seemed too big for its head. A mischievous snarl on its greedy lips, it rummaged through their bags, excited over the spoils. Maintaining silence, Deacon glanced over to his cousins, sound asleep, and smiled in cynical amusement; despite their keenly trained senses, they were blissfully unaware of the meddler.

Having had enough of watching the vile thing go through their bags, touching all their things, Deacon, with a whip of his hand, brought down a vine round its neck like a noose. Instantly it was strung up in the tree, feet kicking wildly. Its shrill scream had Cedrik and Derek up with a start. They saw Deacon standing before the wretch strung up by its neck. It was disorientated and lashing out at all directions with a blunt short knife, till it started to lose consciousness and just hung there, slowly dying. It twitched and squirmed.

“That’s enough!” cried Cedrik, making a move to cut it down. Deacon prevented him with a firm hold, letting it suffer for just a moment longer; then he released it. The hapless creature crashed to the ground in a small bundle, and scurried wildly into the night, without any treasures, but with its life.

“What’s the matter with you,” Cedrik said crossly, shaking off Deacon’s hand.

“I was merely teaching it a well-deserved lesson,” said Deacon flatly.

Cedrik made no answer, but Deacon noticed him exchange a glance with his brother.

Cedrik was concerned for his cousin. He at times seemed to have two opposite natures within him, both extreme; one was a reserve that would have him so silent one could almost forget his existence, the other was this eruptive rage. The inflammability of his blood was alarming. Derek often joked that Deacon suffered from a maniacal illness of sorts, and now Cedrik was beginning to feel certain it was true.

Thick and gloomy clouds delayed the morning sunlight. The young men were reluctant to get up after their interrupted night. When they had finally roused themselves Cedrik approached Deacon, not without some apprehension. He waited a moment, meditating upon how to open the conversation. “Is your desire to go to Cheydon because of your mother?”

Deacon was bent down at his bags. He looked at him with a puzzled expression and deflected, “Isn’t that a strange question?”

“It seems an odd thing that you would choose at random such a remote place to continue study. It is unlike you.” Deacon held his gaze in silence until Cedrik was made uncomfortable and even stammered. “What I want to know is, whether your reasons to go are connected with her last wishes or something, I don’t know. Is there something else? Are you holding up as well as you think yourself to be?”

Deacon’s answer was tinged with the slightest suggestion of amusement. “I think you are suffering more than myself. Do you want to sit down? Why do you forever want to be discussing my feelings like a woman?”

Cedrik was too serious to enter into any banter and said, “I don’t know what it is to lose one so near to the heart, but maybe you could try to explain to me? I think your mother’s passing should not be left—”

“I don’t wish to speak of her,” Deacon said, abruptly and fiercely, as if stung with pain. He stood and moved away.

“You won’t say one word in confidence to me?” said Cedrik, half-exasperated. “Speak—you may have the most entire confidence in my sympathy and secrecy.”

“Cedrik, don’t mistake me,” he said, turning upon his companion with an angry impatience that was wholly unaccountable. “I’ve told you the state of things. Conjecture, suspect, speculate as you will, but I’ll be damned if I’m plagued with it.”

They ate breakfast virtually in silence. As they were packing up ready to leave, Deacon eventually broke the silence, putting his hand on Cedrik’s shoulder saying, “Are we at ease with one another?”

Cedrik pursed his lips, then grew resigned. “Yes,” he said, knowing the futility of pursuing it further.

“Good,” said Deacon. “Then let’s proceed and not waste another minute on it.” All this talk seemed wasted time for him.

* * *

The landscape between them and Cheydon was a bleak, treeless region, with leaden skies overhead. Along the way they passed many scattered villages with thatched roofs, the people generally unwelcoming and suspicious. Harsh lands bred harsh people.

Sitting dead-tired on his horse, Cedrik placed the water bag to his lips and taking a long considering drink, surveyed the dismal stretch of land. Dark masses of distant hills obstructed their view of Cheydon like a massive wall intended to fortify it against bleak winds.

“If we push through we can make it by nightfall,” said Deacon. The beautiful beast beneath him stomped its hoof impatiently and appeared more restless to move than himself.

“Fine,” said Cedrik.

At last they arrived, reviving slightly with the promise of amenity and creature comforts. For the night they stopped at a large two-story inn, situated just outside the city. It had been a ridiculously long journey, and Derek was never so happy to be off a horse. His mind ran solely on thoughts of comfort: a hot meal, good bottle of wine, and a nice soft bed.

Inside was not quite as they had hoped. They entered a large, yet unaccommodating room that smelled of damp, rotting wood and humble to the point of being a place of misery for any well-bred young man. It was full of all manner of people from different lands, most of them dangerous in their appearance. Thankfully, the companions were received with no interest. There were travellers enough, at least half as mysterious as Deacon, passing through here at all times, so that they compelled little attention.

At the counter they were attended by a robust woman, who, if she had not been wearing a dress, might have been mistaken for a stout man. Even so, Derek had to be mindful how he addressed her. They found the cost for accommodation ridiculously cheap, being accustomed to Imperial prices, but because of the state of the place, they would have been opposed to paying any more. After taking their money the woman left, and a stocky brown-faced man took her place. Over his barrel-like stomach he wore an apron covered in unspeakable filth, and he had dirty-brown hands, with worn and blackened nails, that spoke of a hazardous lack of personal hygiene.

“What is it that I can get you to eat?” the innkeeper said gruffly, wiping his hands on his apron as if he meant to clean them. Cedrik’s face paled. Being an Imperial guard he had come in contact with filth before, but never was he so immediately faced with it. He was sufficiently disgusted that he could not bring himself to eat anything prepared by this man’s hands. He looked fretfully over at Deacon who seemed detached and uninterested in anything being discussed, then at Derek who watched with amusement all the unusual people, (most particularly the half-pretty waiting-maids) and knew neither his cousin nor his brother would be of any assistance.

Cedrik blurted out something incoherent to the innkeeper and nearly tripped over Derek in his haste to usher him out. Deacon followed behind

them in his quiet manner.

“What are we doing?” said Derek, annoyed.

Cedrik said to Deacon, “We are not staying here. Let’s find something in the city.” He was thinking of his younger brother, not desiring to subject him to less than ideal conditions.

“It’s late,” said Deacon calmly. “You’ll find there aren’t any rooms available.”

Cedrik scoffed at the notion, and the two stood discussing it, while Derek, looking up at the stars, listened. His hands tucked under his arms, he swayed, shifting his weight from foot to foot. The nights here were quite cold.

“For the love of …can we just go, please?” he snapped at last.

“Yes, let’s move,” said Cedrik.

“All right,” said Deacon, as if foreseeing the consequences.

Aside from the open courtyard at the entrance, Cheydon was somewhat oppressive and secretive in its design. The buildings were joint structures, huge stone blocks running parallel along narrow streets. The only signs of division between dwellings were the heavy wooden doors, and above them, small balconies.

Away from the city, almost a small village in its own right, was a collection of dank wooden cottages, scattered by a massive lake. They didn’t bother to explore that far but instead went to several inns in the city, in search of a comfortable room and uninfected meal.

When they discovered there were no rooms available anywhere and that they could not buy a hot meal because the kitchens were closed, Derek almost had a breakdown, clasping his fingers and pressing them back hard against his forehead, as if he would snap them off.

“Why do I ever listen to you?” he asked his brother.

“You don’t; you wouldn’t be here in the first place otherwise,” said Cedrik drily, tucking his hands under his arms to keep warm. In the centre of the empty streets the young men stood huddled and shivering. It was late, dark, and cold with misty rain. Cedrik was annoyed. As limited as the city was by comparison to the Imperial, he hadn’t expected it to be so unaccommodating.

“Well, we’ll go back and see if those rooms are still available,” said Deacon. “If not, we’ll be sleeping under the stars.” He spoke without any particular inflection, but Cedrik knew Deacon was thinking him a fool. Despite limited exposure, Deacon had been to enough small cities along the way to know that they were quick to close down at night, and rooms were quick to fill, especially at locations that entertained a lot of travellers.

They returned to the inn. Fortunately, two of the rooms were still available. Unfortunately, they had to pay for them a second time. The Inn keeper had feigned forgetfulness. Cedrik didn’t bother to try to reason with the brute, but paid the extra.

As though expecting an attack from all four corners, Cedrik and Derek stepped cautiously into the room they were to share. Standing side by side they stared blankly round the bleak accommodation. It was meagerly furnished and small. “Not much larger than a rathole,” thought Cedrik. There weren’t even any chairs around the old table in the corner. And there was a horrid smell.

“What is that?” said Derek, almost fearfully, his voice muffled through his forearm.

“You’ll become accustomed to it soon enough,” said Cedrik, deliberately not returning Derek’s incredulous stare. “Don’t concern yourself. We’ll find another place in the morning.”

Tossing their bags unceremoniously to the floor, each went directly to his own bed. Cedrik stripped the bed of its sheets and remade it before climbing in. He wanted to make certain it wasn’t crawling with any unfavourable nighttime companions.

Derek’s thoughts were filled entirely on things edible. He thought of his mother’s steak pies—tender steak with plenty of rich, thick gravy—and felt suddenly sick for home.

Much later, Cedrik still lay awake. Rats were in their room. He could hear them scurrying in the dark. He heard Derek mumbling curses in his half-sleep and was reminded how much he hated sleeping in such close quarters with his brother. Derek was inclined to dream dreams where he himself was the hero. Worst of all was a mournful wind that perpetually howled. So monotonous and despairing was the sound that Cedrik, feeling a little desperate, stuffed the pillow over his face. He wondered if Deacon had fared any better with his room.

Chapter 18
New Friend

The first sight that greeted Cedrik's eyes in the morning was Derek lying in a tangled mass of blankets. It never ceased to amaze Cedrik how it was possible for Derek to not injure himself during the night.

Pleased that morning had come and that they had somehow survived, they went into Deacon's room, only to discover his bed empty and no sign of him. Downstairs many of the men had moved off. Deacon was not among those that remained.

"Perfect!" said Derek. "This is just perfect! He brings us all this way, then decides to leave us for dead. I wish he had of done it back at the last village; we could've at least avoided Misery and his death-food," he said, glancing over at the brute of an innkeeper.

"Keep your voice down," warned Cedrik, noticing eyes turn upon them. "He hasn't left us. He's just damn-well …gone off somewhere."

"Truly?" asked Derek, in a tone that earned him a clip up the side of the head.

While they discussed what they should best do, pieces of straw persistently fell onto Cedrik's shoulder. Impatiently he would brush them off, but they persisted. Stopping in mid-sentence he cursed and looked upward to determine the source of his annoyance. A body came crashing through the roof and landed hard at their feet. They jumped back with a start, staring down at a youth. Not long was he on the floor before he struggled to his feet with several startled oaths flying from his mouth. For a moment he stood waiting, feeling himself over.

"Blast almighty, boy!" came a booming voice from behind. "I don't pay you to make bigger holes than what I started with!" The innkeeper pushed

his way past, looking up at the gap in his roof. “Damn me,” he said with awe. His expression then turning murderous, he set his eyes on Cade.

“I’ll mend that one next,” said Cade sheepishly, dust and debris laden in his red-brown hair.

“Like hell you will! Out!” the innkeeper roared, pointing to the door with a thick, dirty finger. Without waiting to see if Cade obeyed, muttering savagely, he pushed his way back past the brothers, who scrambled to get out of his way.

“I still get paid, don’t I?” Cade asked in his most winning tone.

“Out!” came the thunderous reply.

Cade’s shoulders slumped. “I’m not in any pain, thank you! Great baboon …fix your own damn roof.” Cade turned, and a mug of ale was thrust in his face from a concerned and considerate patron. “Ah, thanks. I’ve got a hellish thirst,” he said. He knocked back the frothy drink, the universal medicine in these parts, and wiping his mouth, fixed his attention on the two men staring at him, stunned.

After the initial shock had passed Cedrik approached him. “Are you injured?”

“Apparently not,” said Cade with a one-sided smile, touched if not amused by Cedrik’s genuine concern.

“That was quite a fall.” Cedrik looked up, shaking his head. “Are you certain you’re in no need of attention?”

“I’m fine. Fate has always dealt kindly with me.”

Cedrik raised his brows. “No doubt.”

“That was funny,” said Derek, who had not yet spoken. Cade looked at him as if only noticing him for the first time.

“Not very,” he said. “And now I don’t get paid.”

“Here,” Cedrik said, reaching into his pocket.

“Hey—hey! Put it away,” said Cade, indignant. “I don’t need handouts.”

“Sorry. I just …” Cedrik stumbled, aware he had insulted the stranger, but the youth’s smile returned almost immediately. His gaze ran down the length of them. They looked rather tight-laced and polished.

“Not from around here, are you?” he asked, friendly. “Let me guess. Wynnstan, no, no, I have it. Imperial?” Cedrik smiled with some embarrassment along with pride. “Thought as much.” Cade winked at him. “Come on. Let’s get out of this hell-hole, and I’ll—”

The innkeeper’s voice came booming again. “Out!”

Cade closed his eyes, then, reopening them, finished his sentence. “And I’ll show you around.”

* * *

Speaking as if he had known them all his life, Cade took them into the city. He was in the habit of rough speech. A common-looking fellow, not unattractive, he had the lean muscular look of one who was not disposed to a single occupation, but rather did many different forms of activity. Not strung to any great purpose in life, his attitude was as unexceptional as his features. When Cedrik could get a word in, he gave Cade a brief description of Deacon and asked if he had seen anyone fitting.

“Much earlier, maybe,” answered Cade. “I couldn’t tell you where the fellow was heading.”

“There is an emporium he was looking for, spell books and such. Where is that?” asked Cedrik.

“Right. One of those,” said Cade without any disrespect. “I’ll take you. You’ll most likely get lost.”

The streets maintained a languid feel, filled with the citizens of Cheydon. A solemn people, not unfriendly, but somewhat mistrustful, their

mood was as colourless as the sky. Many were strangers to the city, aloof and mysterious.

The spell book emporium was situated in the city centre, looking no different from the many emporiums, save for the two large and impressive doors. It was musky and dimly-lit inside, so spacious it felt empty, with shelves of books that one could open to any page and be fascinated by the strange words. All was quiet. Only visible were people with bowed heads, absorbed in their studies.

“It’s as if somebody died,” said Derek grimly, his voice a touch loud for the soundless atmosphere.

“Take a look around,” said Cade as if he were the owner of the place. “He’s bound to be in here somewhere. Mind yourselves; you don’t want to be upsetting these sorts.”

The boys split up and went down the quiet passages in search of their fourth companion. Their purposive presence mildly disrupted the readers, who gave disgruntled gazes that lifted briefly, before again turning down to books fondly held. Disappointed to discover Deacon was not here, Cedrik and Derek parted ways with Cade, thanking him. “Watch out for yourselves,” he said with friendly caution. “There are untrustworthy people here. You Imperial boys will get done over.”

Not knowing where to start, the brothers decided to return to the inn and wait for Deacon.

In their room Derek lay on the floor, feet up on the wall, aimlessly tossing pieces of dry bread at the ceiling, which bounced off onto the floor. Cedrik had left him several hours ago again in search of Deacon. It was hard for Derek, who had never known boredom, to sit and do nothing. Aimlessly he waited.

Returning after having being gone such a while gave Cedrik a new perspective of the room. He didn’t know how, but Derek had somehow managed to put it in an even worse state than when they had first arrived the

night before. Tankards were strewn across the floor, and Derek's bed was covered with the entire contents of his travel pack.

"You're really living it up," Cedrik said, kicking Derek with his boot as though he were a beggar or drunkard.

Derek groaned. "You have a strange notion of what living it up means," he said, sluggishly dragging himself up. He and Cedrik looked down at the bread scattered on the floor at their feet. Derek shrugged. "The rats will eat it."

Cedrik tossed Derek a small, greasy bag that contained sweet cakes he had bought in the city, then slumped down onto his bed.

"Food!" cried Derek, taking out a sticky morsel. Never had sweet cake tasted so good. He ate enthusiastically, mumbling through mouthfuls just how good. Looking at Cedrik, he slowed his chewing, then halted altogether. "You don't suppose something unfortunate has happened to him? Do you?"

Cedrik glanced up and gave a short laugh. "If anything unfortunate is taking place, you can be certain he's the cause of it." He shook his head with a weak smile, but Derek could see his concern.

That evening they began to suffer restlessness, arising from their prolonged confinement. They came very near to killing one another before lapsing into a dull and moody silence. When he could take it no longer, Derek said. "I am going out for some fun!"

Cedrik laughed recklessly. "It's raining, and the streets are deserted."

"I don't intend to stand out in the streets," Derek said petulantly. "I was thinking something more along the lines of a tavern. Perhaps get some dinner and maybe some damned entertainment."

"You please yourself."

"You're not coming?" Derek said, disappointed.

“No.”

“Cedrik, I need to get out. I can’t stand a minute longer in this forsaken room.”

“I said, please yourself. If you want to go, then go! What, you want me to hold your hand?”

“Couldn’t hurt.”

Cedrik’s eyes flicked up. “Go!”

Derek was half-way down the road when he heard his brother call from behind. “See if you can’t find some entertainment that doesn’t involve me getting hurt.” Derek stopped and turned back.

“Eh?”

“I said—”

“I heard what you said. What do you mean by it?”

“I’m tired of taking your thrashings,” said Cedrik, half-serious, half-playful. “You get the women. I get the beatings.”

Derek groaned and turning from Cedrik, continued toward the city. “The husband incident?” he said as if bored.

“To name one.”

“One! You’ve taken the brunt of my error, once! Is there nothing new?”

“Once!” Cedrik echoed recklessly. “Don’t make me list the times I’ve stepped in and prevented a beating from ruining your life. You’re pain enough in my ass that I could beat you myself.” Derek gave a snort that was almost a laugh. “I still can’t return to that tavern,” Cedrik said. “He said he would hunt me to the ends of the earth if ever I showed my face again!”

Derek slapped his brother encouragingly on the back. “Luckily for you, the idiot thinks the ends of the earth is just past Borg’s tavern.”

Talking in this way, they entered a tavern. Its only patrons were rough men, interested only in their own company. They had mean-looking expressions, and Cedrik’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “How about I just deck myself now, and we can call it an evening?” he said to Derek, who was scanning the room with disappointment. He thought it looked poor company. There was no gambling, no laughter, and the women looked a little too much like their male counterparts.

“Let’s move on,” he said.

“Why?” asked Cedrik, relieved but surprised.

“The women here frighten me.”

Cedrik was about to laugh aloud; then he looked and saw that his brother was serious, which made him laugh harder, only inwardly. They went into several places and suffered the same disappointment. After a meal at one of the more respectable taverns, they ventured back out into the evening. The lamps didn’t throw much light, and there were no city guards to be seen. So there they were, astray in the streets of a strange city without thought of what to do, where to go, or where their cousin was. It was deserted and lonesome.

“What kind of a city is this?” Derek said, frustrated when it began to drizzle again. He was thoroughly missing the Imperial, where the sky was always blue and there was always something interesting to amuse him.

They had just about given up on any chance of entertainment for the evening, when they round a corner and glimpsed, a little way off, a night-wanderer. He had such a quick, sure-footed step and eagerness about him, Derek thought for certain he would lead them to some excitement. Cedrik only agreed to follow because he was afraid he might be required to put the youth back in his place.

The stranger went out of the south gates and down toward the black lake, where the wooden cottages were. Situated in the middle of the black, unstirring water was a small isle. On it was a dark, impressive structure, amid perpetual mists, and deadened trees that never put forth green leaves. It was a lonely, cathedral-like building. Cedrik and Derek were curious about it, lurking there across the way, but did not pause long. Their guide was fast disappearing down among the obscure shapes of the houses.

Unwittingly, he led them to an alehouse, which was bursting with mirthful laughter. He accompanied a group of young men who stumbled out from the place, laughing and shoving one another. Derek at once felt responsive excitement, and seeing Cade in amongst them, pointed him out to Cedrik.

“There’s Cade! Let’s go talk to him!”

“Let’s not,” said Cedrik drily. “They look a sorry lot of trouble-makers.”

“Don’t be such an old lady, Cedrik,” Derek said, forcing Cedrik to follow and keep pace with him. At their unexpected approach, Cade looked up in surprise; then a smile broke across his half-dazed face.

“Hey, it’s the Imperial boys!” he said, vague with drink. “I see you’ve still got your clothes on.”

Derek glanced down to see that he did and blinked, not understanding the comment.

“I thought you city boys would have been taken for all you were worth and left naked for dead by now,” said Cade, his tone unintentionally condescending. Derek laughed uneasily, while Cedrik’s brow was furrowed deep by the insult. Among them all he was the most skilled fighter and probably could have given them each a bruised head and ego to take home, but he let the comment roll off his back.

The rest of the trouble-makers were bored by the place and were already off, heading down the length of the lake, falling over one another in

drunken foolery. Cade didn’t follow directly but said to Cedrik, “Your cousin, he’s into magic-using isn’t he?”

“Why?”

“I think I know where he is.”

Cedrik knitted his brow. “Where?”

“I’ll show you.”

“Where are we going?” asked Derek, running to keep up.

“The woods,” said Cade.

“The woods? I can hardly wait.” Derek didn’t bother to disguise his lack of interest.

Nevertheless, he went along. Cedrik followed with an easy stride behind. Not far ahead the youths were tumbling and tripping over each other in their mad excitement, till they came to a sudden stop at the edge of the dark wood. Within was a gloom, deep and sombre, that bespoke of evil things. The trees impending over them, none dared venture past the border. Only one among them seemed unperturbed. He watched the others for sport, waiting to see what they would do. The youths unconsciously drew nearer together. The pervading quiet was far more frightening than anything they had ever heard.

“Some say these woods take people,” one of them said.

“Shut up, Jerret,” said Cade.

“Well, why don’t you go in!”

“Ladies first,” Cade said smugly, then turned. “That’s you, Derek.”

Derek shot him a narrow look.

“We are not venturing in there,” said Cedrik in his most stern tone. He felt they were in bad company and thoroughly mistrusted what they were up to.

“I’m telling you,” said Jerret, nervously, “something is wrong with this place. People go missing.”

“Tales to scare boys into behaving,” said another.

“Yet convincing enough that most people avoid the trees at most costs,” said Jerret.

“I’ve been in there before,” said Cade blandly. “If you want me to hold you …” His words trailed off, offering his hand to Jerret who slapped it aside. With mutual jeering the youths ventured into the darkness, leaving Cedrik to stare after them.

“Derek. Get back here!” he called in his most commanding voice but was ignored. “Curse it all,” muttered Cedrik fiercely, as he plunged in after them.

The trees, dark and stately, were evenly spaced and made easy passage. Cedrik and Derek trailed behind the others. They could see their forms just ahead, huddled closely together, nudging and whispering to one another with muted jeering, as though fearful of waking a slumberous thing.

Derek could not suppress a shudder. The woods seemed haunted with an unfriendly cold, and had elements of dread that those even with a lesser imagination than himself would feel. There was an unstirring silence that could almost be heard breathing in the darkness, as though the trees would reveal themselves as something more than silent observers. From within shadows they seemed to pass hushed whispers amongst themselves, secretly, then, fading away, were again silent.

Derek began to feel strange influences creep over him, almost as though the woods wanted him to leave his companions and wander farther into hidden places. He held off the peculiar desires, and glanced at his brother every now and then, to see if he had any of the same feelings, but Cedrik’s

face was inscrutable and set like steel. His gaze roamed fiercely about, as if he anticipated danger at every turn.

Derek caught sight of something that made him stop and squint. He thought he had glimpsed movement. “Did you see that?” he whispered urgently.

“No. Keep up. This was your idea,” said Cedrik, looking forward at the backs of the other men. They had become quiet, but were still high-spirited and animated with the thrill of dread.

Keeping closely beside his brother, Derek peered into the surrounding gloom with an anxiousness amounting nearly to terror. He felt something was with them. He could not see it, but its presence was very real. It emerged in a secret way, moving with them and watching. It was drawing nearer, closing in upon them. The air became thin, and Derek knew it would very soon reveal itself to them.

A sense of dread rose within him, growing hot in his chest. He was straining to hear. At last he came to such a state of terror that the slightest of sounds would have brought his heart into his mouth. Breathing hard, he dared not look over his shoulder, lest he should see the nocturnal object of terror standing at his back. For a moment his eyes closed. He hoped it was but the shadow and wind deceiving him.

Something had moved stealthily within the shadows; a shape of blackness, insect-like. During its nocturnal prowling it had observed the youths and became curious. Creeping through the branches of the trees, it moved unnaturally and with difficulty, yet secretly as with purpose. It watched them, peering down through the foliage. Its black and featureless face was expressionless as a spider, with bulging yellow eyes, unwholesome and cunning. Protruding from the back of its head was a single great horn, black and sleek as the rest of its preternatural body.

Something must have gone terribly wrong with the laws of nature for such a creature to exist, keeping to the shadows like things that are born ashamed of themselves and wish never to be seen.

Derek drew a shuddering breath. He knew he was in serious danger of forever disgracing himself with a shriek.

“This is it.” He heard one of the boys say, breaking the vile spell that had hold of him, and he was relieved when they came to a stop. The fear dispersed and was quickly replaced by the thrill of adventure.

“We’re here,” said Cade. “This is where it all happens.”

Chapter 19
Underground

They stood in a clearing in the wood. “This is where what all happens?” asked Derek, vaguely expectant, looking around and seeing only trees. Then he heard one of the youths speak strange and incomprehensible words. Everything seemed to shift; the air around him rippled unpleasantly, and he began to feel lightheaded. A slight tremor deep within the earth was so subtle he thought he was imagining it, when there came a soft rumble from somewhere, and he felt the earth vibrate violently beneath his feet, forcing him to brace himself to keep balance.

“What the—” Derek broke off with a cry. The ground was breaking and shifting, collapsing in on itself, layers upon layers falling away. Jolted into action, the young men scrambled—running upon elusive ground that perpetually crumbled beneath their feet. It was falling too quickly for Derek to even see where his brother was, and he made a leap forward, but his foot found no support and he fell, digging his fingers into the earth, and with a final effort tried to pull himself up. He wanted to cry out with fear but choked it back. Dust was getting into his mouth and eyes. He had not gripped onto anything stable and soon fell away with the crumbling mass.

After a considerable drop, he found himself facedown on a stone floor, along with the others. He could taste earth in his mouth and could hear loud sounds from a crowd of enthusiastic people somewhere close by. The boys staggered to their feet. They were in a stone chamber of sorts and could see dimly down a narrow corridor. From high above pieces of rock and dirt showered down as the earth reclosed.

Derek looked down at his grazed hands; they stung and burned as if he had run them over fire. Then he felt his brother’s hand heavy on his shoulder turning him round.

“Are you hurt?” asked Cedrik, dusting him down.

“No. You?”

“I feel like my back’s broken. Whichever mad fool uttered those accursed words, I’m going to break his back.”

“That would be me,” came a voice behind. Over his shoulder Cedrik saw a young man with a smug smile. His eyes flickered and rippled with a peculiar hue. Cedrik muttered something derisive about magic-users and ruffled the dust out of his hair.

“Where are we?” one of them asked. The sounds of collective cheering could still be heard.

Cade called to them, “This way, lads,” as he turned and disappeared round a corner, with a haste betokening great excitement.

“I think I have dirt lodged in my brain,” said Jerret, snorting into the sleeve of his shirt, as he and the others followed after. The rough passageway led straight on, and they discovered at the end that an illusionary wall masked a passage.

Walking through it, they found themselves in a large stone chamber, and were almost engulfed by the blind enthusiasm of a crowd of young men, cheering at something happening in the centre. Cedrik estimated there were at least two hundred of them and wondered where they had all come from. Shouting as loud as their lungs would allow, the fools cried out encouragement and curses alike.

Cedrik could see flashes of magic. He had lost sight of his mad companions but kept close to his brother as they forced their way through the moving bodies, keeping an eye out for Deacon. Hoarse shouts rang in their ears. As they neared the centre, they glimpsed at what the youths cheered, and could guess what they were up to.

“Magic duelling is illegal!” Cedrik’s voice of alarm did not rise above the excited cries, and no one, including his brother, paid any notice. Masculine energy charged the air like an intoxicant. Derek was exhilarated, feeling the thrill of danger like a drug that rushed directly to his head. His

insides churned. Cedrik did not share his enthusiasm and seemed overwhelmed by the volatile atmosphere, surcharged with the fumes of adrenalin. All this exertion and these violent passions, radiating within the enclosure, made the temperature stifling, yet the young men seemed determined to enjoy themselves despite the inconveniences caused by noise, heat, and overcrowding.

Spells blistered the air and turned it static. Then a loud clap, as if lightning had struck something, resounded throughout the chamber and excited an overwhelming response from the crowd. Cedrik pushed his way through to the middle, where two young men were hemmed in on every side by rioting youths. The vague anxiety he had felt soon changed into a great dread. He had found his cousin.

In the intensity of his concentration Deacon appeared blind to all but his opponent. Calmly he stood, gathering thousands of tiny charged particles into his open palms, till they became one great mass of destructive energy that spat and thrummed between his hands. The prickling sensation swept over Cedrik, and he watched Deacon suddenly hurl the mass, backed with the full force of his shoulder, at his opponent. Only just rising from the last assault, the youth was sent a distance into the crowd, which scattered to move out of the way.

“Deacon!” called Cedrik. But his voice was drowned down and lost among shouts.

“He’s been here for hours!” said someone next to him, in a tone approaching admiration. “No one can bring him down!”

“I can bring him down,” Cedrik muttered fiercely and took a step forward, but the person put out a detaining arm.

“I wouldn’t,” was the warning. Cedrik turned on the man, but something in his face told him to pay heed. Reluctantly Cedrik stood back, watching to see the outcome.

Refusing to remain down, the youth disentangled himself from the crowd, tense and with clenched fists. He had enjoyed the most unbounded

reputation for being undefeated, and in coming to a fixed determination that this reputation would remain intact, he again proceeded forward, but Deacon, with one single stroke of his arm, hurled him again, dashing him with great force against the wall. The youth was relentless, getting to his feet each time and returning with unfailing perseverance. They both were wearied, particularly Deacon, who had been taxing his powers of endurance several hours longer. He faltered momentarily, doubled over in pain, and his opponent took advantage of the moment.

Humiliation fuelling his animosity, he strode to Deacon and made a pass at his head with a clenched fist, but Deacon deftly evaded the stroke, seized him by the collar and fetching him forward, tossed him to the ground. He tried to stand, but Deacon brought down his fist, striking him with such force he was rendered momentarily senseless.

“This is ridiculous,” said Cedrik, seeing that it had degenerated into a mere fistfight. Determined to break it up, he started forward, but the same person prevented him. Cedrik, exasperated to hostility, was at the point of taking a swing at somebody himself, when there was a sudden flash of blinding light. Quickly he turned, only in time to see the opponents had been tossed to opposite ends of the chamber. Both lay motionless a moment, then, neither willing to be thwarted, rose to their feet.

The youth was the first to revive. His hands broke into flame, and as he strode forward he hurled flashes of fire, one after the other, toward his tormentor. But no flame could reach Deacon. With downward swipes of his hands Deacon snuffed them out in an almost impatient fury, as though the youth’s arrogance annoyed him. He wanted more. He wanted to push his endurance to its limits. This boy was nothing to him. Extinguishing the flames took very little toll on Deacon and enabled him a moment’s reprieve, so that his energy now served him anew.

Cedrik and his brother watched in mute awe Deacon’s tremendous display of power. He always executed his magic with full command and mastery, but the fever of rage began to burn in his chest, and he let his pain rain down on his opponent, as if under the direction of some cruel force. So savage was he with the youth, they feared Deacon would utterly destroy him.

With a storm of the fiercest blows, Deacon drove his opponent backwards until he was looming over him, releasing all of his accumulated misery in a fiery barrage upon the youth, who, finally weakened beyond endurance, sank to his knees, barely shielding himself from the full force. Deacon positioned himself directly over him, the heat of his anger raining down on the youth.

Cedrik was trying to decide the best course of action to take, but then the fiery torrent suddenly ceased to pour forth. Deacon waited, breathing heavily. No longer could he hear the crowd for the pounding in his ears. He was consumed by the violent ecstasies that pulsed through his blood. His eyes, dark and concentrated, stayed fixed upon those of the youth, whose own breath was far more shallow and fast.

Cedrik waited in suspense, fearful of his cousin's inflammability. It was too late to react, when he realized Deacon was not reconsidering. Gathering his strength for the final blow, Deacon drew on an intense amount of power. He could feel, with satisfaction, the pulsing force course through him like lightning, igniting each cell. Waves of energy travelled over Deacon's limbs and engulfed his entire body. He felt intensely the pressure build within him, until it was impossible to contain. He was on the brink of releasing it, when slowly he lifted his eyes to see his cousins, to see a striking similitude between the brothers as they stared with expressions of horror, but he was past the point of being able to hold back. The pressure came upon him before he could gather his forces for control, and suddenly, all his blood exulting in his release, it was discharged.

Giving a sharp cry, the youth slumped to the ground. Heavy convulsions shook the body; then it was still. The nostrils gradually filled with blood. With his heart slamming, Deacon stood back from the form sprawled there, inert. Diminutive blue threads of energy writhed across Deacon's body. Some of the more violent sparks singed and burned his flesh, but he was oblivious to them. His entire frame shook with the adrenalin coursing in his blood, and his breath came in ragged gasps. He had quickly consumed his energy by reason of its very violence.

He dragged his hands down his hot face. Sweat stung his eyes. He felt relief and a deep sense of gratification, but to see the broken form who had

paid the cost for his release shocked and distressed him.

When it was noticed the youth did not stir, a deep silence filled the room. No one dared approach the motionless form, who now had blood trickling down from his nose into his slightly opened mouth. The horrified stupor lasted only a few moments, before whispers passed round, and Deacon felt wide eyes staring.

Suddenly his strength abandoned him entirely and he pushed through the crowd with an urgent need to get out. Cedrik and Derek lost sight of him as he staggered and stumbled through the men who stood dumb and reluctant to move. A number of his friends gathered about the unconscious youth until finally, and at last, he came to.

When Cedrik saw that the youth had escaped death, he and Derek quickly threaded their way through the crowd after Deacon. Coming to stand in the small stone chamber where they had first arrived, they stood looking upward, wondering how it was they were supposed to get back out. They had not seen how Deacon managed to leave and were relieved when Cade caught up with them.

“How, for pity’s sake, do we get out of here!” said Derek. Then feeling anxious and frustrated, he commenced bouncing up and down, hoping to trigger something into action.

“We need to get out,” Cedrik told Cade with some urgency.

“Wait here. I’ll get Bayne,” said Cade, and went to retrieve the obnoxious magic-user. When they returned Bayne said the strange words Cedrik thought to be the most damnable he had ever heard, and without any warning he and Derek were drawn up as if by a powerful vacuum.

Their arms and legs flaying wildly, they felt as though falling upward, and continued this ascent with sickening speed, fearing they would be crushed against the earthen ceiling, but somehow it was soft and they broke through. They seemed to over shoot, however, and were again falling down, when they hit the hard ground, lying flat on their stomachs. Groaning with pain, they dragged themselves up, bruised bodies aching.

Again they found themselves in the dark wood. Not far from them was Deacon, leaning heavily, with his head on his forearm, against a tree. He wore his heavy elven-made cloak, yet still appeared to suffer from the unnatural cold.

Cedrik's anger was up. He went to Deacon and said almost into his ear. "Have you gone mad? You could have killed him!" Pushing off the tree with difficulty, Deacon turned to face them. His countenance, deathly pale, drew Cedrik's sympathy, and he said with less force than before, "You didn't kill him. But you easily could have." At this, he had hoped to see relief in his cousins face, but Deacon, feverish and weak, said nothing and showed no sign of relief or remorse. Again Cedrik grew cross. "Have you no regard for life, then? Your own, even?"

Deacon only stared with a sardonic, almost cruel gaze. Cedrik regarded him with mingled anger and pity. He was hunched over as though sickness beat down on him, and Cedrik saw now that he trembled.

"I know you're trying to kill your pain," said Cedrik with a pleading reproach. "But you're only killing yourself. You can't keep—"

"Tell me!" Deacon demanded with sudden energy. "Must everyone feel the need to counsel me on grief? This is my pain! And I will deal with it in my own way," he said, as though a wave of exhaustion had taken all strength from his voice.

"You—" Cedrik's reproof died as he looked at Deacon and saw his lips had become stained with blood. "Your mouth," he said with sudden alarm.

Deacon went white and staggered as if about to fall. Reaching out a hand, Cedrik tried to support him, but Deacon shoved it aside. "Get away from me," he rasped, wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. His body, stooped over, was racked with pain. It was so severe Cedrik feared Deacon would lose consciousness. Deacon sagged against the tree for support. He was pasty white and sweating with the chills.

Cedrik and Derek looked on helplessly. They could see that their cousin was sinking in more than one way.

“You look like you just went twelve rounds with a stone wall,” said Cade from behind. He went boldly over to Deacon. “You’ll be all right.” He clapped him heavily on the back. Cedrik and Derek winced with sympathy. They knew for him, being Riven, it was far more serious than if any other mage had overtaxed himself. Deacon didn’t move but swallowed hard and looked as if he might throw up.

“How does that boy fare?” asked Cedrik, wanting to draw Cade’s sympathetic attentions away from Deacon.

“Ah, the lad’s fine,” said Cade. “These fights can often get brutal. I once saw a fellow I know get three fingers blown clean off. The poor beggar can’t count past seven now.” Cade’s laughter died when no one else accompanied him. He sighed. “Well, we should move on before trouble comes looking for us. Your hero here just nearly killed one of the Nolan brothers, and they’re pretty mean when you get all five together.”

Cedrik frowned. “Perfect.”

Cade looked as though it was all a joke to him. “Come back to my place,” he said, his tone brisk and certain. “You can get your things from the inn when morning comes.”

“Where do you live?” asked Derek.

“Down by the water. Come on.” He shook Deacon into mobility. “Let’s get you out of here before we have to drag your carcase out.”

All four moved off through the wood. Deacon lagged behind, arms clasped round his shoulders. Occasionally Cedrik glanced back to see if he was still with them and couldn’t help but feel eerie. Deacon appeared dark and strange as he passed silently through the shadows of the trees.

The cottages were all locked and darkened in sleep as they weaved their way through to Cade’s home. The night air was heavy with the smell of damp vegetation. Quietly, the boys stepped up onto the porch. Cade turned the handle and put his weight against the door, but it didn’t budge. Stepping back, he said incredulously, “The old hag locked me out again.”

“Old hag?” Derek echoed, keeping his voice down.

“My grandmother,” said Cade. “We’ll have to go around back.” The boys shuffled out of the way as he turned and went back down the steps.

“You live with your grandmother?” Derek whispered, as they made their way round the side of the cottage. They stopped at a stone half-wall that enclosed a small piece of land, which served as a backyard. Cade and the brothers vaulted over easily, followed by Deacon, who climbed up and dropped over the side with a grunt of pain, pulling his cloak protectively about himself.

Cade knelt down by the house and found that the basement door was bolted on the outside. He rattled it in frustration.

“What now?” asked Cedrik in a low, impatient voice.

“She locked this one, too,” said Cade. Then, motioning to the lock, he turned to Deacon. “Can you?”

“Don’t,” said Cedrik and laid a firm hand on Deacon. “Why did she lock you out if you are welcome?”

Cade didn’t appear to hear the note of mistrust but stood up, turned to Cedrik, and said, in a fierce whisper, “Because she locks the door at night when she goes to bed. This is not so friendly an area, if you haven’t yet found that out yourself.”

“Why haven’t you a key?” said Cedrik, mildly.

Cade sighed sharply. “She doesn’t like me coming home in the night. Which is why I haven’t a blasted key!” He looked sheepish for a moment. “It’s a kind of punishment for if I’m home too late,” he said, looking about himself as if bored.

Cedrik ground his jaw, thinking. It didn’t seem likely that Cade would invite them back to a place where he had to force an unlawful entry.

Cade bent down and picked up a sturdy rock. “This is going to cost me,” he said, stepping forward as if he meant to put it through the glass window. They heard a clink of chains and turned to see that Deacon had unlocked the door to the basement.

“Ah, good!” said Cade, tossing the rock aside. He stooped down and heaved open the wooden doors. “Well, move on,” he said. “Let’s not wait for this one to drop dead.” He led the way down the few steps into a basement filled with wooden boxes and storage cupboards and up a stairwell into an unlit corridor.

Feeling cramped, Cedrik thought the house to be as dreary as the inn they had swapped it for, but when Cade opened the door he saw a neat room, with a fire burning low, and a kettle on the hob.

“Are you certain this is no trouble,” Cedrik began, but dropped into silence. Cade indicated, with a nod of his head, his old grandmother sleeping in a chair. A frayed blanket was draped over her thin legs. The boys immediately lightened their step and, like thieves in the night, made their way toward the staircase.

Cade had got one foot on the first step when his grandmother stirred. Almost bumping into one another’s backs, they froze as if caught in some act of mischief. Sitting forward in her chair, she couldn’t clearly see in the subdued light. Not wanting her to be afraid, Cade said casually, “Go back to sleep. It’s only me. Some friends of mine are going to stay with us awhile.”

Cedrik almost swallowed his tongue. He would never speak to his mother so presumptuously, and quickly added, “If it doesn’t prove an inconvenience.”

Cade shook his head with a look that said: “Belly-crawler.”

Cedrik’s good manners were lost on the old woman. She gave a derisive snort and stared. Her gaze lingered particularly on Deacon who, looking ill, kept his head down, his lips white and compressed. Standing, he began to grow excessively weary.

“Get away now.” She waved her hand and closed her eyes, sinking into her arm-chair. “Mind you don’t keep one another awake with your foolishness,” she muttered, as though speaking to children. Cade stared blankly at the old woman, sound asleep as though she hadn’t once stirred, then turned swiftly and led his guests up stairs.

In the dark room, Cedrik’s foot caught on something that almost sent him down. He cursed and stood still until he could see. When their host struck a light, Cedrik saw they had entered a room in the most astounding disorder, worse than Derek could ever hope to achieve. Deacon was sufficiently disgusted but crashed into the bed on the far side. It was the only one free from clutter.

“That’s my bed,” said Cade, but Deacon had fallen into a sleep that was more like unconsciousness. Looking incredulous, Cade set to work clearing off the other two beds. Cedrik and Derek watched him toss everything onto the floor, adding to the general disorder. “My brothers used to share this room with me,” he said to make conversation, recklessly tossing things over his shoulder.

“There’s only three beds,” Derek said with dismay, knowing he would be the one to have to sleep on the floor with the rats.

“One of you can sleep next door in my sister’s room,” answered Cade simply, then threw a dirty shirt at Derek’s face. “I’m the only one left with the old woman.”

“Where is she now, your sister?” asked Derek, aghast at the idea of sleeping in a bed belonging to someone deceased.

“One of my sisters,” said Cade, “lives with my parents. She stays here sometimes. The rest are round and about. My brothers and sisters all sort of went their own ways.”

“Just how many brothers and sisters do you have?” asked Cedrik.

“I have three brothers. Five sisters.”

Cedrik gave a little sound of disbelief, amazed at how so many people could have lived under the one roof. “Where are your parents?”

“They moved to a place west of here called Broom. Heard of it? It’s only a three-day ride, so I see them more often than I would like. The others not so much. I don’t even know where two of my brothers are living. But I couldn’t leave. The old hag needs me, you know?”

Cedrik smiled to himself. It was evident Cade loved his grandmother, though he would thrash anyone who said so.

“Besides I like it here,” said Cade. “I’ve got work, and my girl’s here. I don’t have a need to leave.” He stood back from the cleared beds. “Take your pick.”

“I’m going to sleep in your sister’s room,” said Derek, taking himself out the door.

“Touch any of her things, and I’ll break your fingers!” Cade called, then turned to Cedrik who was watching Deacon. “He’ll be right when morning comes. You’ll see.”

Cedrik pulled back the covers to his assigned bed. “It is good of you to let us stay here.”

“Not a problem,” came Cade’s sleepy answer. “The mage isn’t going to try and murder me in my sleep or anything is he?”

“Only if you talk in your sleep,” said Cedrik.

Cade cast Deacon one more fearful glance before putting out the light.

Chapter 20
Tavern

Cedrik was the first to wake and was restless. He hadn’t anywhere to go. He would not go downstairs to where the old lady was until Cade could accompany him. He had doubts she would remember him from the previous night and wanted to avoid either a fainting spell from her or a broom beating for himself. Soon he was stepping carefully over the clutter with the intent to wake Cade. He stood over him and saw with both amusement and alarm that he was gripping a knife in his hand as if it were a stuffed toy.

“Do you always sleep with a weapon in your hand?” Cedrik asked, clearly and distinctly, standing back so the sleeper didn’t wake with a start and stab him.

Cade groaned and tugged the blankets up over his shoulder. “Only when there’s a mage sleeping in the bed next to mine.”

Derek appeared at the doorway. Usually it would take his mother to drag him out of bed by his ankles, but evidently the activities of the previous night had given him a new perspective on the city. Squinting out from under his blankets, Cade said, “You boys up and ready to go, already?”

“We should probably retrieve our things from the inn,” replied Cedrik, sitting down and putting on his boots.

It was a slow and painful process for Cade to get up and moving. For a long moment he sat on the edge of the bed, stooped over. “Give me a minute,” he muttered in a gravelly voice. He glanced over his shoulder at Deacon bunched up among the blankets. “See, he knows it’s not yet time to get up. It looks like death took him instead of sleep—look at him.” He picked up something to toss at Deacon, but Cedrik caught his wrist.

“Better to let him sleep,” Cedrik said.

They made their way downstairs to the small, cluttered kitchen. There they found a hot breakfast waiting for them and ate as only boys know how. The coffee was hot and strong, and a heaped-up dish with sausages, crispy bacon, eggs, and hot fried cakes was far more pleasing than meals such as Cedrik and Derek had previously made acquaintance with. Grateful for the old woman's hospitality, Cedrik offered his and Derek's assistance in any way that might prove useful.

"Don't get all fancy. Just eat," she said and picking up a broom, set to her house chores and let the boys have their breakfast in peace.

"You worked some magic on her. Normally she would have set to work any man staying in her home," said Cade, putting another spoonful of eggs onto his plate. "You lads can stay here as long as you need. There's no rush for you to take off."

"If it's not a problem," said Cedrik, "we could find a place more suitable to us in the city if need be?"

"We don't mind the company," said Cade.

"All right, then," said Cedrik, pleased. He liked it here. No one would describe the cottage as grand, but there was something altogether homely about it.

Cade wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. "There aren't any rules to abide by here. Only mind you don't aggravate the old woman. She can kill a man within five yards of her tongue. Understand?"

"Understood," said Cedrik uneasily, looking over to see if the grandmother was hearing them, but she was wholly engrossed in her housekeeping.

"If you don't mind my asking," said Cade, "what are the two of you doing so far from home? You surely didn't come all this way to enjoy Cheydon's fine weather, now did you?"

"We came here because Deacon wanted to," said Derek.

Cade blinked vacantly a moment. “So you mean to say you just follow him around like two little slaves, wherever he goes?”

Cedrik gave a short, uncomfortable laugh. “No. We only recently suffered misfortune in our family,” he explained. “Deacon was most affected by it.”

“Ah, I see,” said Cade. “So you’re keeping an eye on him, making certain he doesn’t lose his mind and start blowing people limb from limb.”

“We just didn’t want him to be alone at such a time,” was Cedrik’s brief reply.

“He’s not like either of you,” said Cade. “You certain he’s your cousin, and someone’s not just having a go at you?” Casually, he resumed breakfasting and without lifting his face asked, “What side is he from?”

“His mother is sister to our father,” replied Cedrik, assuming that was the question asked.

“No, I mean which elven realm, North or South?” Cade looked up from his plate, chewing, and looked from one to the other, waiting for an answer.

“Northern,” answered Cedrik with a bewildered expression. “How did you know?”

Cade shrugged. “He’s got that look. There’s something a little peculiar about him, if you don’t mind my saying so, I mean even for here. We’ve had elves before, dark elves mostly, mind you, but they do come here sometimes. Is he one of them? Half-blood or something?”

“No,” said Cedrik. “He lived in Loriendale, but he’s got no elven blood.”

“He lived in Loriendale?” Cade looked impressed. “What business has he with the elves then?”

“His mother was wedded to one of them,” was Cedrik’s brief answer.

“I have a cousin who’s been to the elves, once or twice,” said Cade. “Not to any such place as Loriendale, but he’s been to Evandale, so he tells me. More likely he had one too many and stumbled into the woods, thinking they were the elves—probably made it with a few trees.”

The brothers said nothing. They thought it best to leave that one alone.

Some hours later Deacon awoke. He was glad to find himself alone. Tossing aside the covers, he struggled from bed, suffering unpleasant aftereffects. His foot hit something, and he looked down to see that his bag had been placed there. Retrieving a few personal items, he crossed over to the washbasin to splash his face with cold water. He shaved and made himself neat, as usual, then made his way downstairs.

He found himself in the company of the old woman jabbing at tangles of cobweb. With all the cleaning she could give the cottage, it would still have been but a place of torment to any woman of refinement. She hadn’t yet noticed Deacon, and as she turned, her elbow knocked the ceramic vase off the table. Instead of shattering on the floor it remained suspended. Startled, she looked up to see him standing at the base of the staircase, his hand outstretched. Without apparent effort he kept the object still until she, not without some unease, plucked it from the air and placed it back to its rightful position.

“You’re down disgracefully late, boy. Your friends have already come and gone again,” she told him.

His countenance remained impassive and unfathomable. Straightening her frock over her thin frame, she regarded him with uncertainty and was notably uncomfortable at being alone with the young mage. She had heard of the things they could do: summon apparitions from the nether realms, induce madness with illusion, even bind one to their will and force them to do their bidding.

Hot and flustered, she brushed a frail hand across her brow. It was not entirely inconceivable that her face might once have been rather attractive, though the persistent scowl made it difficult to ascertain what she would have been like in youth.

“I’m stuck with you, am I?” she asked, resuming her usual gruff indifference. Pushing past him, she said, “Come to the kitchen.” She was a great deal shorter than Deacon but led him into the cluttered little space with all the authority of an overbearing parent. “Sit,” she said and drew out a chair from the breakfast-table. Deacon did as asked. The old woman set a heaped-up plate in front of him. “You’re lucky I kept anything for you. It nearly went to the dogs.”

Tying an apron over her frock, she let him alone and set to preparing the afternoon meal. Into a large iron pot, atop a wood stove, she threw coarse cuts of meat and roughly chopped potatoes. She worked hurriedly and with agitation, as though it was all a bother to her. Often she glanced at Deacon as he struggled through the breakfast she had kept warm for him. He was far more quiet than the others, yet she was strangely more conscious of his presence.

“I need something from the cellar. Shan’t be a moment,” she said briskly, drying her hands on her apron.

“Shall I go with you?” asked Deacon.

“So you can speak, can you?” she said, antagonistically. “I was beginning to think you were one of the gods’ special sort.” The comment drew a slight, bitter smile out of Deacon. “What are you smiling for?” She waved her hand at him. “Eat your damned breakfast.”

“I’m not particularly hungry.”

She leaned against the table, stared critically at his face, and said, somewhat repulsed, “You’re a sickly-looking thing, aren’t you? I’ve seen things lying on their backs under my cupboard look healthier than you.”

Deacon smiled to himself. A shade of contempt darkened his face. His look of illness was a sort of shame to him.

“You’ve been ill, haven’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied coldly.

She straightened herself. “Well, I don’t suppose you’ll be much use to me, will you? Doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t trust you anyway. There’s a lot of your sort around here. All trouble-makers. Don’t go making trouble for yourself now, you hear?”

Deacon dropped his eyes again; an insolent humour curved his lip, and he knew she had an impulsive urge to box his ears.

“Eat!” she said, muttering to herself as she left him to go down into the cellar. When she returned, Deacon was gone. He had left nothing for her to clean after him, and she was surprised and pleased to discover that he had fixed things about the kitchen that had been long in need of attention and which Cade had promised to get around to and never did.

For the remainder of the day, Deacon occupied his time at the spell book emporium, lost among scrolls and books, which he consumed with an insatiate hunger. Often he was frustrated and found much of it scarcely adequate. Finally he found something that took his particular interest. He purchased the book and returned to the cottage and his cousins.

An abrupt silence greeted his appearance. The boys, lounging rather than sitting, looked up uncomfortably. It was just as though he had walked in on some plot against him. For a moment he remained in the doorway. Changing to a sitting position, Cedrik nodded to the book. “What have you there?”

“Nothing that would interest you,” Deacon answered as he entered the room, failing to acknowledge the other two. “I see we are to stay here?” he remarked, observing that all their belongings had joined Cade’s clutter on the floor.

“You might as well. There’s not much better, and here you can stay without cost.” Cade spoke with his usual cheer.

Tossing the book down onto his designated place of sleep, Deacon barely acknowledged having been spoken to. Heavy with disappointment, he lay down. After a long silence, Cade proposed a drink and dinner at the tavern.

Well-occupied with himself Cade stared into the mirror. With a rough hand he brushed down his hair that would not lie flat, no matter how he pressed it. Cedrik and Derek watched his vain attempts. They were dressed in the newest and finest cuts, all in perfect order, and all becoming. Deacon was half-reclining over on his bed, book in hand. He glanced up occasionally at Cade, who had spent the past half hour going through numerous changes of garments.

“I have to get myself some new clothes,” complained Cade, then turned to Cedrik. “Let me wear one of your shirts.”

“Why?”

“It’ll make me appear as if I have more coins in my pocket,” he said, catching the shirt Cedrik tossed to him. As he slipped it over his head, he caught Deacon’s disparaging look. “What?”

“When a man spends his energies on appearing to have, he’s all the while losing the precious little time he has in which to actually have,” Deacon answered without lifting his eyes from the page.

“Pfft. You, my friend,” said Cade, turning to resume grooming, “are in desperate need of some togetherness with the fairer kind. And good strong ale,” he added, the drink being his remedy for almost every ailment. “Come with us.”

“No,” answered Deacon.

Cade ignored his irritability and took the shirt off. “I don’t like this one,” he said to Cedrik. “What else do you have?”

“Is this really necessary?” said Cedrik, tossing another.

“I’ve got little more than myself to offer,” said Cade. “So at least if I can appear to have a little more, I stand a chance at grabbing a woman’s attention, and perhaps a little more if I can get away with it. A rich man is never unattractive in the eyes of a woman, now is he?” Dressed in Cedrik’s

raiment he had the air of a scrounger who had contrived to give himself a respectable look.

“Surely women are not such fools as to prefer the gold over the man,” offered Cedrik mildly.

Cade shrugged. “Who can say? They’re unfathomable creatures when you come to consider their strange impulses and reasonings. They’re all mysteries, and that’s the way I like to keep it. Look too close and you’ll lose an eye.”

“Haven’t you a dozen sisters? Have they not given you some insight into the feminine mind?” said Cedrik.

“Five, and no,” answered Cade, making his voice as dry as possible.

“I thought you said you had a girl already,” Derek gave Cade a sporting jab in the ribs.

Cade lifted an elbow to defend himself. “Do that again and I’ll poke you in the eye. She is my girl. She just doesn’t know it yet.” He shrugged and rolled his shoulders as if uncomfortable in his borrowed clothes. “Right. Now we can go.”

He turned to Cedrik and Derek, draping his arms over their shoulders. “I’m going to introduce you to some real women, my friends, not those showpieces you city lads call women. These ones will put hair on your chest.” He looked over at Deacon. “Come with us. You need to eat, don’t you? And you don’t want to stay here with only yourself and the Crone.”

Deacon closed the book with a lazy movement of his hand.

“I’ll introduce you to some friends of mine. It’ll be a good time, you’ll see,” promised Cade, when Deacon rose to join them. “Only don’t start any trouble with your madman tendencies. And don’t, for the gods’ sake, frighten all the women with that accursed stare of yours.”

Deacon fixed him with a dark look.

“Right,” said Cade briskly. “Let’s go! Wait, you’re bringing that?” He pointed to the book in Deacon’s hand. “You mad tortured bastard.”

* * *

The tavern was rowdy and busy. The innkeeper rushed back and forth filling tankards for many thirsty patrons, while the waiting-maids hurried about, weaving in and around the tables, mopping up spills, refilling empty mugs, and serving dinners.

“It’s loud in here!” shouted Cedrik, hinting that he wished to be somewhere else.

“Bloody unendurable!” Cade said with a laugh, pushing past people. At a noisy table near the fire, they joined a group of Cade’s friends, some of whom Cedrik recognized from previously. Cold drinks were promptly ordered for the new arrivals, and Cedrik and Derek were very soon at their leisure.

Deacon remained quite separate, absorbed in the pages of his book, occasionally shifting his gaze to watch the dancing flames in the fireplace by which he had stationed himself. He was at his ease, yet was a stranger in the room. Preferring to keep a clear mind, he drank very little and kept to himself. He found no satisfactory company in the slow-moving brains of the village lads and took no pleasure in any of the pretty waiting-maids who frequented the table for conversation and sometimes to steal a kiss from their lovers.

A pert little waiting-maid sat on Cade’s lap, putting her arms about his neck. From her forward manner, Derek presumed her to be the object of Cade’s affection, when only moments after she left, another pretty thing took her place, sitting on his lap in the same familiar attitude. Her hair was tied in a ribbon with an annoyingly tight knot. “Take it out,” she said, turning her head from him to see.

Cade, preoccupied in trying to untie the knot for her, wasn’t conscious of Derek laughing at his frustrations. He was starting to perspire from the heat, which made his fingers stick and pull at her hair. Growing impatient,

she was trying to tell him how he should do it. That increased his irritation. It wasn't until he finally threatened to cut it out, reaching for a knife, that she removed herself, shoving his head aside as she passed. When the ribbon situation had been resolved, the girl returned to Cade and commented on his different apparel.

"You like it? I think it looks good," he said, seeming unware he had lost her attention to Cedrik.

"He thinks this new look is going to somehow win Adriel," said one of them at the table. The girl looked upon Cade contemptuously.

"Except, isn't it true that once a man has won a woman, he no longer wants her?" she said. "It's born into you lot, isn't it?"

"No man ever has to win you, loved one," Cade said.

Her eyes narrowing, she flicked the remnants of ale from an almost empty tankard over his face. She gave a little cry of delighted protest as he suddenly reached across and dragged her onto his knee. "You're only jealous," he said, playfully struggling to keep her detained in his arms.

When she had finished her happy interaction with Cade, she went boldly over to Cedrik with the hopes of igniting discourse with him, and by her look, a vast deal more. Her face was fair enough for his taste, his blood had beat up the moment she brushed past him, but Cedrik was a little startled that a woman would give herself so freely. It was his belief that any woman worth having would hold herself at a higher price. A man must prove himself worthy if she is to be won.

His polite reserve did little to discourage her. With a nymph-like coyness she took a seat next to him and put her feet up on the table in a relaxed manner, crossing one boot over the other. Cedrik cast down his eyes, assuming a blank look and deliberately avoiding her gaze. He thought a world of trouble looked out from those eyes.

Giving him a sugary smile, she said, "Well?" She had noticed him glance at her uncovered legs.

“Well, what?” asked Cedrik with innocent sincerity.

“Will you offer to buy me a drink?”

Cedrik glanced over to a nearby table, at which he presumed sat a jealous lover, and said, “I think he’ll be buying you a drink.” He motioned with his head over to a man with an angry vein running down his forehead.

“That’s my brother,” she said. “He’s only jealous.”

“Jealous?” repeated Cedrik. “What has he to be jealous of?”

“He doesn’t like me speaking to men.”

“I see he has no quarrel with speaking to women,” Cedrik observed.

She smiled. “So, will you buy me a drink then?

Cedrik shifted uncomfortably in his seat and reached for his drink. “Angry brothers and alcohol never mix well with me.”

“You don’t like me?”

“For certain I do—who could not?”

“You have a woman waiting for you?”

“No.”

“Maybe you would prefer to go someplace else?” She waited for his response with arched brows and parted lips.

“I’m not stopping in Cheydon for many more days,” he explained. He was perspiring. She gave an amused laugh, believing him to be afraid, and with heavy, languid movements took her legs down from the table. She had a very flattering way with men, and it was not long before she had deserted Cedrik in favor of another.

Derek, while busy trying to project calm disinterest, was half in love with every pretty girl in the tavern. One in particular caught his attention. She had her boot planted on the chest of a ruddy-faced patron, pinning him to his chair, while she balanced in one hand a tray of drinks, not caring that her skirt had fallen back to reveal a good deal of lily-white thigh. Grinning like a fool, the man reached out a grubby hand to touch her. With a savage push of her boot she knocked him backwards off the chair. She continued to attend tables without being bothered by the commotion she caused.

She strongly appealed to Derek. He watched her dealings with the men with raised brows. She was unaffected by their crude ways, clipping them sharply into line. Each person in Derek's party lowered his voice whenever she passed and sat uneasy as if he feared he might be tossed out.

"That little fire-tongue will bleed you, Derek," said Cade, noting the woman had captured his attention. But the caution did not deter him, nor did watching as she sweetly beckoned a man forward with one finger, then caught him a sharp smack across the mouth. Several unkind remarks were muttered about her at their table.

"What's her name?" Derek asked, excitedly.

"Who?" asked Jerrett.

"That woman you've just been on about." He motioned to the redhead.

"Lorali," answered another. "Mind what you say to that one, otherwise there'll be a whole lot of pitiful sobs …and they won't be coming from her."

For Derek, when it came to women there was never a long delay between design and execution. He downed the last of his liquid courage and made his mind up to approach the fiery redhead. He moved forward decidedly, weaving his way through the many spirited figures, determined not to return until the object of his affections was obtained.

"She's going to bleed that little beggar," said Cade, leaning back in his chair, laughing, till his eye caught Cedrik's sharp look. The smile dropped

off his face and he adopted a blank expression.

Assuming an entirely different manner with her than he had with the boys, Derek approached the fiery waiting-maid. She kept busy tending to tables and brushed him off as if he was nothing more than an annoying insect. She didn't seem to care that he had addressed her by name.

"Don't speak to me," she said, when he attempted to introduce himself.

"This is my first time here to Cheydon," he said.

"Hopefully it'll be your last," she answered.

Derek stood with a perplexed expression, as though he couldn't understand what she had just said to him. Being refused was a new and disagreeable experience for him. "That depends on you." He followed after her.

"That thought was late in coming to you," she said in her rather sarcastic way, leaning over a table to retrieve a pile of dirty plates. She didn't bother to look at him.

"Here, let me take that for you," he said, very gentlemanly.

"No. Get off." She lifted her elbow to push him aside.

When finally she remained still, standing at the counter, Derek took the opportunity to speak with her, believing the hecticness of her occupation to be the cause of hostility toward him. "I'm from the Imperial city," he said, hoping to impress her. "My father and brother are both—"

"I'm finished for the evening," she called out to the innkeeper, tossing her apron behind the counter. As she turned to leave, Derek stood in her way.

"Permit me, at least, to see you home," he offered in his most winning tones. "You're likely to meet rude company along the way, dressed as you are."

The last comment provoked a response he wasn't expecting nor prepared for. Suddenly and savagely she turned and inflicted a storm of verbal abuse upon him, the insults spilling unchecked, till the poor youth knew not where to look. From a safe distance the others sat back watching the pitiful spectacle, laughing themselves into coughing convulsions. Their merriment was aided by the considerable consumption of ale. Having no other notion of how to react, a curve of amusement came to Derek's lips.

"Oh, don't smile." Cade put his hands over his face as if he couldn't bear to watch.

Soon they saw a despairing frown cross Derek's features. Evidently she had said something that was not favorable to his vanity. He stood bewildered, with helpless hands. He had not much experience with these sorts of women and their tempers. To be refused in such a manner was killing. His own inner self, still shaky and adolescent, was easily crushed.

As her finishing note, she poured a full tankard of beer down his front. Then she pressed her lips hard to his and followed the assault with an even harder slap to the cheek. She left him dazed and confused, not knowing whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

From the table Cedrik watched with a creased brow, arms folded over chest. He had half a mind to have a word with her; she had gone out of her way to humiliate Derek. "That was uncalled for," said Cedrik crossly.

"I doubt he's so heartbroken he'll never turn to another," said Deacon, also watching. His passivity belied his annoyance at the drunken, exaggerated foolery.

Upon the dejected youth's dismal return, Cade laughed, slapping him on the back. "That went well!"

Derek rubbed the back of his neck as if it ached. "She called me some very harsh names."

With the remains of his pride, Derek took a place near to his cousin and decided he would stick to ale for the remainder of the evening. Deacon

glanced up from over the book. “What are you doing?” he asked, as Derek fell into the seat opposite with unnecessary effort and noise.

“Came to see you,” said Derek. “I’ve given up on women for the night.” He lounged back and rested his boot on the edge of Deacon’s chair. Deacon gave a tight-lipped smile and pushed Derek’s boot off.

“Don’t speak to me,” he said, his eyes returning to the page.

“That’s twice I’ve been told that in one evening,” Derek complained. He chewed on his lip, looking at Deacon.

“What?” Deacon looked up impatiently. He could feel Derek watching him.

“What are you trying to do here?” asked Derek, peering over.

Deacon sighed audibly, irritated by all the noise and movement. “I’m trying to familiarize myself more thoroughly with these words.”

“Words?”

“Words of a particular form,” said Deacon. “Different syllables and sentence structures put your mind into different states, as do hand gestures and verbalizing. These here are the most effective in bringing the consciousness to the desired state.”

“What?”

“The phrases focus the mind more efficiently toward the desired objective, so there is less demand physically.” Derek sat uninformed, chewing his cheek. “It’s about focusing the mind to an extreme point so that you can communicate your will. The more I learn how to do this, the less taxing it is on my body.”

Derek nodded sagely. “In other words, it’s as if trying to give directions to someone who doesn’t know your language. You’ll eventually get them to understand, but it would take less effort if you could speak their language.”

“Something of that nature,” Deacon agreed. “Mages of exceptional skill need neither to verbalize nor use hand gestures to achieve their objective.”

“I thought all this came naturally to you?”

“Anyone with the right application of his mind can control energies.”

“Will you teach me something?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to be the one responsible for unleashing you into the world,” said Deacon in a tone of banter, contrary to the seriousness of his mood.

A young woman with warm chestnut hair and warm brown eyes had observed Deacon. Throughout the evening as she went about serving tables, she stole coy glances in his direction in hopes of attracting his attention. He appeared not to notice, but he knew. She watched as he sat there, intent, his eyes concentrated on the page, his mouth pressed shut as if he were angered. Finally she caught his attention. He glanced straight at her. She felt herself flush under that gaze, brief as it was. She was both fascinated by and afraid of his otherness—that underlying strangeness that set him apart from his companions.

When she finished serving another round to the members of his party, she ventured over to address him personally. “Here,” she said, handing him a drink. “This will help loosen your tongue.” For a brief moment the hands of both remained on the tankard, but she hadn’t the courage to touch his hand. His intense eyes looked up from dark brows. “You haven’t spoken all evening,” she said, timidly.

“I have done,” he replied.

“Not to me,” she said with a shyness she thought became her. As she smiled down on him, Deacon noticed for the first time how attractive her

flushed features were. He smiled, then looked down again. His heart was too sore and his mind too heavy to enter into any discourse with her.

Hugging an empty platter to her breast, she did not detain his eyes a moment from the book. Her attention was fixed upon the nape of his neck, where the dark hair ended and the tanned flesh ran smooth. She was keenly interested in him. His manner was quiet and guarded, but it did not require keen eyes to detect the hidden inferno. Standing there above him, she felt awkward. He was not having her. She shifted her weight several times, not knowing what to say. His intense reservedness was like to his pushing her back with a hand.

Lounging in his chair, Derek watched as Deacon actively ignored the beautiful woman. He thought it was strange; more than strange, it was inhuman. “Don’t worry about him,” Derek said, getting her attention. “He doesn’t talk to anyone, not even his own cousin.” He slouched down and pushed Deacon’s boot playfully with his own.

“You’re cousins?” she asked, surprised.

“I could tell you a few stories about this one,” Derek said, glancing at Deacon, who gave no response more than a slight crease in the dark brow. Happy to be close to Deacon without the strain of speaking to him, the woman continued the pleasant exchange with the more approachable one. Not once did Deacon return the glances she was constantly directing towards him as she spoke. The drink had loosened Derek’s tongue and got him to spilling stories.

“Don’t make her suffer through any of your distorted tales,” Deacon said.

“I like them,” she said.

“Perhaps then you should sit. He’ll go on and on, now that you’ve permitted it.”

The young woman almost beamed, happy to have won a word from him. “What is it that you’re reading?” she asked, reaching her hand

forward.

“I wouldn’t touch that!” said Derek, as if fearful of what might happen. She held back her hand, rather startled, looking at Derek with frightened eyes, waiting for him to explain.

Deacon looked up. “She can do as she pleases,” he said, the mildness in his voice akin to politeness.

“What will happen if I touch it?” she asked.

“Place your hand there and I’ll show you,” said Deacon, almost affectionately.

She liked his voice, which was deep and handsome, and she liked his heavy-lidded eyes, which were blue and dark, and which looked at her with a strange intensity. She crouched down at his side. She could not resist touching the book and his hand that held it firmly. She felt a low current run from the book through to her, a strange heat striking through her flesh, so that her very blood seemed to run warmer. Almost it was dreadful. Dimly she knew it, even as it sent little thrills of delight through her.

“Isn’t it a strange warmth?” she murmured, shifting to get nearer to him.

“Energy radiance,” he answered.

A warm and secure glow from the fire gently enveloped them like the comfort of a blanket. For a time the noise and irritation was pushed aside, and only the gentle crackling seemed heard. Deacon brushed his thumb lightly against her hand covering his, as though languor bound them and softened them to one another. Talking quietly, she remained at his side. She was kneeling, bending forward to be near him, but he remained passive, giving her the minimum of his attention. Derek had sometime before returned to the table, giving Deacon time alone with the unfortunate young woman. After a time she stopped speaking, finding he did not answer. It seemed he had forgotten her, his eyes fixed downwards, reading.

She contented herself to watch him in silence, with waning interest. In a moment she placed her hand on his thigh, but it won from him not a spark of interest. She removed her hand and sat back, her eyelids sinking a little with annoyance. Deacon could sense her boredom and irritation, yet continued on as if entirely absorbed. In times past he would have had his fair share of interest and perhaps gone away with her for the night, but a change had passed over him. Desire was dead inside him. She was scornful of him and his removed nature and left without a parting word, evidently upset. His gaze lifted and followed her, but he didn't care that she had left him.

Harassed by the noise, Deacon found it difficult to maintain concentration. Finally he closed the book and set it aside, resting forward with his arms leaning across his knees. He watched the young men at the table trying to impress their jeering friends. Derek was the centre of attention. They had entered into a game with him, their objective to make him drunk. They wagered on who could drink the most without becoming overcome; in this way they succeeded in getting him to drink to excess. Just short of eighteen, he was at the foolish age where incitement was easily achieved.

Although he took pains to appear blind to it all, Deacon sat solemn with a clenched jaw, keeping himself in check. Inside he was burning. The room had grown intolerable.

Derek was handed a small drink that he had never before tasted, a vile drink that made his mouth and stomach feel on fire. He held it hesitantly to his lips. He could almost feel it burning before it even touched them.

"Get it down you quick," said Cade, slapping him on the back. "Don't let it touch your tongue," came the belayed warning as Derek knocked it back. There was a brief moment when his face drained and he looked as if he might be sick, but he came around. He scrunched his face. The drink stung the tongue and warmed the throat, so that he could scarcely breathe for a time. He gagged and spluttered as the hot liquid rampaged down to his stomach that filled with a resonating warmth, which, once settled, was not entirely unpleasant.

“What is that?” asked Derek, impressed, his eyes watering. The stimulating effects had him wanting more. He had another, and another, till the sensations were suddenly no longer agreeable, and he lay back in his chair with a groan. By the end of it he was such a sorry-looking wretch that Cade and the others left him alone, laughing aloud in their rowdy fashions.

Cedrik frowned at his brother’s lack of self-control. The sorry youth clutched his head in both his hands and complained of the pain. Cedrik had no sympathy or patience for him. “You’ve made quite a fool of yourself,” Cedrik said. “I think now we should go.”

He was answered by a pitiful groan.

The women who had been watching Derek fawned over him. His hair was ruffled from their persistent, indulgent attentions. One offered to retrieve for him something to eat, another clutched his head against her, his face and nose crushed up against her breast. She released him abruptly when he announced he was going to be sick.

“Come on. Get up,” said Cedrik, trying to get sense out of his insensible brother. Derek lay half-sprawled over the table, plastered to immobility.

Tormented almost beyond endurance, Deacon became feverishly annoyed. His forbearance reaching its limits. The laughter and chatter at last became so obtrusive he rose in agitation. “Get up, you drunken fool,” he said to Derek, assisting him to his feet roughly by the back of his collar. Derek was about to protest to his rough handler but saw that his blood was up and he was in no mood to be played with. He knew that Deacon would physically drag him out if need be. Several women in their party complained and tried to persuade Deacon to let him stay longer.

“Help us to convince him,” they pleaded with Cedrik, who looked helplessly from one woman to the other.

Deacon turned and left Cedrik to their persuasions. Stepping out into the street he came suddenly upon two girls, who clinging to one another, weak with laughter, stopped as though they had encountered a dark impervious wall. The smiles fell from their lips and quickly they made a wide berth

round him. The girls, on their way into the tavern, squeezed passed Cade and the brothers on their way out, Cedrik supporting Derek’s bent-over form.

Chapter 21
Dark Procession

The smell of damp earth hung heavy in the night air. The young men sat quietly on the bank of the black lake, upon which the moon shone down, quivering like liquid gold.

Cedrik sat on a rock. Derek lay at his feet, his arm bent across his eyes. He felt as though he had been beaten and wondered if they had not taken to him with a stick while he was in his stupor.

“The night’s quiet,” observed Cade, looking up at the stars dimmed by wisps of clouds.

“Not quiet enough,” complained Derek, feeling sorry for himself. He had vomited so violently he was convinced that his last hour had come. Moaning like a man who is dying, he thumped his booted foot against the rock.

“Will you stop doing that?” said Cedrik, pushing his boot away. “Why must you always have your feet up all the time?”

Derek didn’t answer but rubbed his face miserably. After a moment he said, “When strength returns to my limbs, I’m going to thrash you, Cade.”

Cade laughed heartily. “Ah, they all say that the first time.”

Standing quite apart from the others, Deacon stood with his shoulder leaning against one of the rocks, looking out across the still, black surface of the lake, the book clutched to his chest. Certain elusive scents drifting in the air forced upon him sentimental yearnings for the happiness of home, but he had lost the single entity that had any semblance of such a place. Along with her, his home was lost and buried.

The thought of it hurt so terribly he could scarcely bear the ache that spread from his throat down and around his heart. Reflections of Mariwen also came undesired upon him. He thought with bitterness how devoted he had been, how willing he was to support and yield to her, desiring that she should belong to him. Now he felt only broken feelings, fragmented too utterly to give their meaning to him. With effort he banished all thoughts of her. He would not go back to her.

“It’s a pity some of the girls didn’t accompany us,” Derek said, sobering a little in the night air.

“You’re ill,” Cedrik reminded him.

“I don’t care.”

“You would’ve cared when you made them cry, heaving up as you were.”

Derek gave a short grunt of a laugh, then frowned, his stomach rolling with remembrance.

“I don’t know what you lads would’ve done with them if they had come with us,” said Cade. He gestured at Derek. “This one can’t keep his drink down, and you, Cedrik, turn away perfectly good women who fairly throw themselves at you.” Cade looked disgusted. “And this one here! He’s got eyes for nothing but that accursed book!” Deacon glanced in his direction, but made no remark. “You’re a disgrace, all three of you.”

“And which happy lady is yours to lay claim to?” asked Cedrik. “You seemed to have several.”

“Ah, no. The gods save me from it. One is more than enough trouble for what she’s worth.” Cade puffed out his cheeks, then said: “The lucky lass wasn’t there tonight, unfortunately. I’ll have to borrow this again.” He held out the front of Cedrik’s shirt from his chest.

“You may keep it, if you like.”

“Just as well; I spilt gravy on it.”

Cedrik smiled, then his face became serious. “What’s that place over there?” He nodded across the water at the foreboding structure obscured by cold mists and sickly trees. He had been looking at it for sometime and wondered what it was.

“I won’t take you over there,” said Cade, rather scornful.

“It looks like a temple of sorts,” said Cedrik.

“It’s dedicated to Demise.”

“The goddess of death?”

“That’s the one.”

“It’s a dark form of worship.”

“It’s morbid,” said Cade. “A breath away from necromancy, if you ask me.”

At the mention of the dark art Cedrik glanced over to Deacon, aware of his cousin’s intense dislike, but Deacon looked out over the water without any sign of having heard. Nearly overcome by the emotion roused in him by the memory of his mother, Deacon turned and made his way back toward the house, leaving the others to stare after him. A morbid silence fell over them. Cedrik bit his lower lip, wondering if he shouldn’t have a word with Deacon, just the two of them alone.

The air in the woods was half mist, half twilight. Nothing stirred. If there was any life here it was hushed and hidden. All the trees stood well spaced from one another and were stately despite their mournful appearance. Within the gloom, Deacon knew a quiet grove in which he spent long hours of solitude, finding these woods to be the only place sufficiently quiet for him to escape and become entirely absorbed in his study, without fear of interruption.

Clapping shut the book, Deacon sat with fevered frustration. He had tried to divine for Luseph several times and had failed. Each time he set his mind to it, the necessary concentration would elude him. Thinking of his father, he found his mind became unclear and hot with temper. A vague memory, surcharged with horror and dread, forced itself upon him. His very soul revolted against the remembered contact of his hands. The violent images seared into his consciousness with a permanent scar. He hated his father passionately.

The night was quickly drawing in. Deacon was heading toward the cottage, when he heard Cade's voice call, "Where have you been!" He turned and saw that they were down by the water. Hesitating a moment, not certain if he wanted company, he made his way toward them. "Where's your book?" was the first thing Cade asked, noticing that he did not carry it with him.

"I have no further use for it," said Deacon simply, coming to stand next to Cedrik, who aimlessly tossed little rocks out into the lake.

"Do you think it wise to disturb the water?" asked Deacon, after a moment.

"Why, there's nothing in there, is there?" Derek said, turning to Cade as if to seek assurance.

Cade shrugged and tossed a stone in anyway.

"You've been gone for hours," said Cedrik as he clutched Deacon's shoulder and gave an affectionate squeeze.

"I know," said Deacon, brushing a hand over his brow wearily, his face down-bent.

"How much longer do you suppose to stay here?"

"I don't know how long I'll remain, but you and Derek are free to leave whenever you wish it."

“We’ve got nothing impending to return to,” said Cedrik. “I think Derek is enjoying himself, in any case.”

Both looked affectionately over at the younger one as he leaned over the water as far as he could without falling in, trying to see through the darkness to the bottom. “What are you doing down here from the house?” asked Deacon.

“Hiding from the Crone,” answered Cade without explanation.

“How about we go to the tavern for just a little while?” suggested Derek, bored.

“How about I hold your head underwater for just a little while?” asked Cedrik.

As the evening progressed they lapsed into a dejected silence. Derek lounged against a rock, persistently tossing little stones at his brother, opposite. “One more …” threatened Cedrik. Derek smirked, but tossed aside all the stones. Letting out a discontented sigh, he lay his back against the cold earth and stared up at the stars. The evening mist from the lake cast mournful reflections into the minds of the young men. One in particular was deeply affected. He stood with his shoulder against the boulder, staring out across the mass of water as if forgetful of his companions. Silent in his deep absorption. Then over by the woods something caused Deacon to glance up, and at once riveted his attention. So still as he was, his slight start caused the others to look around also, and, catching their breaths, see what he saw.

Keeping to the shadows by the edge of the woods, a dark procession of priestesses passed down toward the water, their majestic gowns trailing behind them. Each wore a fine black veil drawn down over her face, and each held a small bowl with a flame reverently between both hands. Haunting in their dark similitude, there was an element in their beauty that gave a sense of dread. As they passed, one of them turned, without moving more than her fine neck, in the direction of the awe-inspired observers. Among her dark kind it was evident she was not one of them. Though she looked as they looked and moved as they moved, she was separate from

them, isolated by her own singleness, a quality of being on her own, of not belonging to any living soul.

All four men looked at her, but it was one man, and only one, at whom she looked. And though outwardly he remained the perfect exemplar of stillness, Deacon could feel his breath quiver within his chest with every beat of his heart. He alone was the figure to draw her attention. He could not clearly see her features lost to shadow, but he saw, looking from beneath the veil, her beautiful penetrative eyes turned toward him. Unconscious of anything outside of each other, they gazed on one another with an intensity that excluded all else.

Observing the exchange, Derek turned hastily to his cousin. “Who is she?” he asked, an eagerness betokening great admiration.

Silence was his answer.

“Deacon? …Deacon, who is she?” Derek repeated, rather breathless. “Who are they?” He turned to Cade, finding no response from the other.

Cade took a moment to answer. “Dark priestesses, servants of death.” His voice was low and scornful.

“Priestesses?” Derek repeated, excitedly.

“Only in your dreams have you seen such beauty,” said Cade with a peculiar mixture of admiration and abhorrence.

Derek’s persistent questioning broke the spell on Deacon. Coming to a sense of himself, he cast down his eyes. After a brief time he again looked up, but she had since turned her face and did not cast a single glance backwards. Down by the water’s edge the priestesses waited with a reverence so still and silent that the night itself seemed to withhold its gentle breathing. The absence of sound about them was uncanny, not quickly forgotten. They were not left to stand here long before what they waited for made its presence known. A lonely boat, gliding through the black water, came toward the shore with secret purpose.

As the priestesses waited, their young admirers were straining their eyes to make out the features which the veils obscured. They each possessed a cryptic, evanescent beauty and a sombre grace that was more effective than beauty itself, an unnatural stillness in their bearing. Cedrik stared as long as politeness would permit, while Derek was shamelessly obvious in his interest.

“What do you suppose they do over there?” he asked.

“Unholy things,” answered Cade. “Few that I know ever go there to worship.”

“I think I might go and worship,” said Derek.

Cedrik almost laughed. “Since when do you pay homage?”

“I think now might be the time to start.”

“I wouldn’t,” said Cade. “Sometimes the men who do go over, don’t come back.”

“Because they can’t, or because they don’t want to?” asked Derek. He couldn’t help but notice the gowns the priestesses wore were more clinging and attractive than solemn worshippers would usually wear.

“They belong to a black form of worship,” said Cade. “Some say they offer sacrifices.”

“Animal sacrifices?” asked Derek, scrunching up his face in disgust.

“Human.”

“Mustn’t be,” said Cedrik, as if correcting him. “Any living sacrificial offering is illegal.”

“I’m only telling you what I’ve heard,” said Cade. “In any case they’re ill news. It’s best to steer clear from them entirely.”

“Why?” asked Derek, not convinced that the loveliness he saw before him could be as treacherous as proposed.

“Because they are evil,” said Cade. “They aim to destroy you for the sheer pleasure of it. Take my word for it, those women will rip your heart clean out of your chest, then leave you to bleed to death like a whimpering little wretch. Why do you think no one goes into those damned woods!”

“Except you and your trouble-making friends,” Cedrik said.

Cade laughed. “Well, can’t hide behind our mother’s skirts forever, can we?”

Cade had cast such a cloak of mystery about the priestesses that Derek craved to uncover it. His curiosity tortured him to such a degree that he could scarcely resist going and speaking to one of them. Nevertheless, he restrained himself. “They’re a little frightening,” he said, quietly.

“Isn’t that what I have just been telling you, damn it!” said Cade, frustrated.

“I have no doubt they’re a great deal superior to you lot,” said Derek, wanting to go over.

“That fact alone hardly proves them saints,” said Cade. “They have robbed men I thought impervious, of their senses. I had a friend who I once respected a good deal. It was pitiable to see the state he was reduced to when he became infatuated with one of those creatures. She played with his mind and tortured the poor beggar till he was senseless, out of his mind.”

“Where is your friend now?” asked Cedrik.

“He left several years ago. He sort of went mad. I haven’t heard from him since. Take my word for it, it always ends badly. In any case, they’re forbidden to the likes of us. Their order has taken the path of chastity. They’re bound to certain peculiar vows. Not that it matters to me. I would sooner bed the mage.” He said this with shuddering disgust, looking over at Deacon, but he seemed little conscious of anything outside of her.

On its arrival the priestesses boarded the boat. Night-mist obscured the hems of their dark gowns which trailed behind them with haunting smoothness. Deacon stood tensely, watching with evident interest.

“I’m glad to see their witchery holds no power over you,” said Cade, his voice becoming dry and sarcastic. “And after everything I’ve just told you.”

Deacon turned his eyes slowly upon him and said in a tone of remonstrance, “I prefer to form my own opinion, based on my own observations.”

“What observations!” exclaimed Cade. “That was a rare thing you just beheld. They never come out of that torture fortress, and they’re as likely to poison you as they are to speak to you!”

As if not hearing what he had said, Deacon fixed his attention on the lonely boat, bearing the priestess toward the isle.

“It always ends badly.” Cade shook his head. “Love her from a distance if you must, but don’t touch.”

Chapter 22
Temple

That night in his bed Deacon lay awake, his mind charged with thoughts of the dark priestess. It seemed the whole world was asleep but him, but far across the black water, within that terrible structure, the priestess who consumed all his thoughts was awake in her own bed.

Lying motionless, black hair unbound, Magenta gazed upward through the darkness. In her vast loneliness she was repressed and unreachable. Her entire being quivered with anguish. She was like a flower cast in darkness for too long, wilting for want of light and love of the sun. All her days were spent in concealment, forced to preserve a faith she abhorred. Like a blossom trying to bloom in deep shadow, she struggled against the life-denying principles by which they lived. Her imposed faith was a cruel form of martyrdom, devoid of truth and validity.

There was a deficiency of light in the chamber, as in all the chambers of the temple. Always she bolted her door. Strange inhuman things walked the corridors by night when all was still and lurked in the shadows by day. Sometimes she would hear them scratching and brushing against the door, applying pressure as if they sought entry. Not even within her own chamber did she feel safe; the trapped night groaned with life, the darkness seeming a thing unto itself, alive and breathing. She could feel it pressing against her as though conscious, with its own awareness—possessive, malevolent, purposeful in its intent to get inside her.

“It is a frightful thing to permit a girl to grow up without knowledge of the goddess and the sacred principles which should be infixed in her conscience, if happiness is to be secured beyond death.” Those were the words uttered by the high priestess the day Magenta’s father placed her in the maternal hands of the detestable woman. In giving her life, Magenta’s mother had lost her own. The high priestess was the only semblance of a mother she had ever known, which was an unfortunate thing.

The woman was base and cruel, concealing her black nature behind righteousness and cold-hearted charity. This life was all about endurance and suffering. Then, when she had proved herself worthy, she would be taken into the dark comforting bosom of death.

There was a strange sanctification in death. The afterlife, the high priestess felt, would belong to her. She would be a goddess, and in bringing others with her, dark glories would be hers. This was her belief, fortifying her faith immovably with immutable ritual, preserving it, hardening it against every corrosive threat, extinguishing the light of free-thinking among her priestesses and the flame of individuality as one might smother a fire.

Although they were to devote themselves to reflection and study, it was to be within the confines of the dark-orders methods, an imitation of individual thought. Their studies were intended not for enlightenment, but for solid immovable instruction. They were not to be free, but wholly under the high priestess's dominion.

The existence of a dark priestess was cruel and utterly subservient. Yet they were told not to be afraid; fear is faithlessness.

"Sorrow and affliction afford us an opportunity for growth," she would say with careful certainty, before inflicting some inhuman method to ensure obedience and submission to her authority and thus deepen the impression she was supreme.

In silent defiance Magenta struggled to resist the high priestess's iron-bound will. She had no need of an institutionalized belief system to show her how she should live. She needed only to rely on her own inner knowing. She would obey only higher laws, universal laws that even the gods must obey. In her gentle heart she believed self-mastery, growth, and achievement need not only be accomplished through affliction, but through all experiences. Love, sorrow, and joy are the great educators. Love is the greatest of all, for one is always ennobled and uplifted when having truly loved or been the recipient of such a love.

Shrouded in a miserable atmosphere, Magenta did her duty and endured the rest in a quiet despair. The warm blood flowing through her was scarcely adequate to keep the ebbing cold from embittering her soul.

* * *

Magenta was heading inside the temple when she saw the wicked scurrying of one of the preternatural things that lurked in the wood. It was heading down toward the water to return home. And she knew that someone was taken. The creatures served only the high priestess.

Tall and austere candles cast a livid light over the majestically adorned walls. Drifting down the empty hall, her head inclined, her thoughts inward, Magenta found her heart was soon struck cold. To her came sounds horrible beyond conception: bellows of agony and torment. The voice was distinctly male. The cries carried up from deep within a ceremonial chamber. It was not the first time she had heard such sounds.

She rounded the corner and slowly drew toward the dark passage. Much moved by the man’s desperate, inarticulate entreaties, she gathered up her long gown and carefully descended the narrow steps. There was something of the sensation of a catacomb about those stone stairs leading down into darkness.

Magenta came to the heavy wooden door that separated her from the afflicted individual. From behind she could hear his low moans and cries. By degrees they died off. Amid the deep silence she listened for any sigh of life, praying most ardently that it was ended. Then came a cry so piercing, so desperate, Magenta started violently. Placing her hand upon the door with the intent to enter, she heard another voice along with the pitiable one that caused her to wait. It was forbidden for Magenta to be here, but she made her mind up to do that which she had never before attempted.

The door was fastened with a latch secured by an advanced charm, but its intricacies were not beyond her capability. With a gentle motion of her hand, the bolts were propelled and withdrawn. She entered secretly, concealing herself among the shadows. There were many burning candles, yet only the feeblest light broke the darkness, which was needed to commit

their abominations. The air was laden heavily with the acrid vapours of poison.

Upon an ornate and austere altar lay the motionless form of a man. The glow of candle light was the only warmth upon his flesh, of which the upper half was naked. He appeared in an altered state of consciousness, trapped in dark visions. Now only the feeblest of moans would escape his lips. Occasionally he would bare his teeth as though in pain.

Besides a single scratch down the centre of his chest there were no visible signs of mortal wounds, but there was no doubt that he had been tortured by the acutest measures. The high priestess had forced entry into the deepest recess of his mind and filled it with dark images. She did not sacrifice her offerings with knives or any such weapon. It was crude to use such instruments against the flesh. Any man could easily be made to bleed. Her methods were far more internal. She weakened their resolve, enfeebled their minds, and broke their will, until the desire to live was utterly spent.

Next to his tormented form the high priestess stood, the flames casting a lurid light upon her ghastly white face. She had no colour, no sound, no heart. She bathed the lips of the unconscious sufferer with a damp cloth. “With death comes life,” came her chilling words to Magenta. From amid the shadows she watched, secretly, with a sense of dread. Never before had she witnessed a sacrifice. She knew the memory of it would not die.

For one last time the high priestess anointed his eyes with a potent herb, the juice of which entered the delicate flesh and into his blood. This excretion, laid upon sleeping eyelids, would trap a man or woman in a state of unnatural slumber, from which it would be impossible to rouse him with usual methods, leaving the slumberer vulnerable to any thoughts and suggestions. Whispering hateful fantasies into his ear, she then left him to die.

When quite certain she was alone with him, Magenta came out from her place of concealment and went to the altar. The young man lay suffering severe mental anguish, his head lolling side to side, eyes squeezed shut, trapped in some evil dream. There was something so pitifully innocent in his features, despite who he might be or where he came from. With

hesitating fingers she touched his face. All her life she had been imposed to hold herself severely aloof from physical contact. Now, with a certain tender abandonment, she allowed herself this contact. He was so vulnerable, so defenseless. She tried to comfort him, stroking his brow with the utmost gentleness.

Within herself Magenta was in conflict. She was not allowed to be here, but she felt a deep sentiment of sympathy keeping her at his side. She could see how helplessly he struggled to keep hold of the thin thread of existence. Closing her eyes against the piteous sight of him, Magenta left him to his fate. There was little hope to successfully steal him away, and the consequences if she failed would be considerable.

For many hours his face haunted her. Only by a persistent ache of compassion was she finally compelled to make an attempt to help him escape. Deep in the night she returned to him. Trembling, she untied the black scarf which had been drawn so tight round his throat as to stifle his cries, but she did not release his hands from their restraints. She feared in the impaired state of his mental faculties he might become violent.

In her bed the high priestess was roused suddenly from sleep. Whispers in the dark told her of the betrayal taking place down in the ceremonial chamber.

From a small wooden chest Magenta took several vials, each containing substances derived from plants. Deeply moved by his situation, she endeavoured to awaken him by every means she could. For one instant the heavy lids were raised from the dream-laden eyes, but he then relapsed into a condition of partial unconsciousness. At length she succeeded in dispelling his stupor and attracting his attention. Kindly she smiled into his eyes. It seemed the soul had returned to them. Upon the sight of her, bent over him, he uttered a plaintive sound. Gently she hushed him, speaking softly and reassuringly, as one does with a frightened child.

In every aspect of her countenance there was a strangeness that set her apart from ordinary women. Her cheeks had a transparent fairness in which the colour never rose, and her shadowy eyes, a haunting deep blue, made

her appear that which she was not, but it required only a little acquaintance with her face to see the beauty of compassion within its delicate lines.

As she unfastened his hands, he watched her, still in a daze of trying to distinguish between dreaming and reality. When he realized that the woman before him was flesh and blood, not some morbid creation of his own mind, he took hold of her, and sitting up, burst into a frightful fit of sobs and pleas, clutching her like a man drowning.

For a moment she was drowning with him. She attempted to pull apart, trying for gentleness at first, but then, with increasing force, pushing against his chest, struggling in desperate silence. He held her fast in bewilderment and terror. He thought she was going to leave him, abandon him to this waking reality of horror.

At last, his strength failing him, she broke free. He tried to follow but sagged down against the altar, bunched in a shaken heap. For a moment she would not approach him. When the paroxysm had somewhat spent itself, she kneeled down, touching him with a quiet warmth of manner that placed both him and herself at ease with one another.

“You must be quiet now,” she said. “Gather your strength, and I shall see you out.” A sound—a drawing of bolts—forced them into quicker action. “Do you have strength enough?” she whispered urgently. With some difficulty he seemed to comprehend her meaning and assented with a feeble nod. Assisting him to his feet, she draped his arm over her shoulders. He staggered with uncertain steps, leaning heavily upon her.

They made it to the safety of shadow not a moment too soon, before several servants—Draegers—entered the chamber. The eerie forms didn’t so much walk as they did glide. These women were blood-begotten but had become something else, something dark and spectral, bodiless and insubstantial. However, they could become substantial at will. Quickly they saw that the sacrifice no longer occupied the sacrificial altar.

Hidden in the shadows, quivering against one another, the two waited, silent and motionless. His body was heavily pressed to hers, and the wall at her back assisted in supporting his weight. His face hung near to hers. She

could feel the warmth of his breath shudder against her cheek. The effect was strange, as if she had been near him for some time and yet had only just become aware of him.

They remained deathly still and could hear as the servants conversed; their tones expressed no emotion, but it was evident they spoke of him. Briefly his brow creased, and the gentle brown eyes lifted to hers with thankful devotion. They waited some moments before the opportunity to steal out the door undetected presented itself. They got as far as the stairs, when half way up, he slumped against the wall, excessively drained of strength. He leaned there a moment, perfectly motionless. “Please,” she said with gentle urgency. “We mustn’t linger.” Struggling, he gathered his energy and pushed away from the wall, once more depending upon her.

It was a small triumph that they reached the top of the stairs. Their pulses beat high with fear and the fragile hope of escape. With unfaltering purpose, he leaning over her as they walked, she led him down a long hall. She knew exactly where to take him.

They rounded a corner and came upon the high priestess, standing far down at the end of the passage. Their hearts sank when they saw her. She came forward with unhurried steps, as if knowing they had no place to go. She walked with sweeping majesty, her splendid form impressive in stature. Yet she seemed brittle, as if she concealed some secret pain.

Magenta glanced frantically back over her shoulder to see another escape route, but coming up through the floor and through the walls the Draegers swarmed and prevented them from making a move. The high priestess came to stand before them, very near, terrifying in her beauty. Her countenance was severe, an unwholesome white, yet her skin was smooth in spite of her age, which could not be less than fifty years. She was tall, straight, and magnificent, a passionately proud woman—a woman to be afraid of.

The young man and the priestess remained clutching one another; each feeling the need to protect the other. “Please don’t hurt her,” was all he could utter, with no strength in his body to protect the one who had risked her own life for his. Before either could make a move to prevent it, the high

priestess struck out. Neither saw the sharp implement she held as she did so, but in an instant his throat was opened.

Magenta gave a gasp that ended in a stifled sob as he fell from her arms; she could not hold the dead weight. He writhed only a moment at her feet, bleeding, before he stilled. She turned startled eyes, wide and wet, toward the high priestess who took her hurtfully by the arm. She would show Magenta what it was to lose favour with her.

Chapter 23
Magenta

In a grove cast in subdued light, somewhere deep within the woods, Deacon sat alone. Ghostly mist drifted about the trees, and the air was sweet and thin and quiet.

An elusive fragrance, like that of a rose borne on the evening breeze, softly awaked his senses. Presently, he became conscious that a faint voice flowed through the silence. Rising slowly, he caught haunting fragments of a hymn. Almost unconsciously, like one in a dream, he followed.

And there, passing through a stream of moonlight, a dark tranquillity pervading, was the maiden whose voice had so entranced him. Her uncovered hair was smooth and black as night. With sombre despair she drifted through the trees, her head downward. Beyond the gentle murmur of her voice, an intense stillness prevailed. When she turned her dark gaze upon him, he saw that it was she! He saw now that the perfect face was stained with tears, the eyes filled with such sadness, that a deep throb in his heart urged him to go to her. But though he would, he could not. The holiness of her person put her out of reach, made her unapproachable, otherworldly, mysterious. Fain to stay where he was, he stood and watched, with the agony of mingled dread and of hope, hoping that perhaps she would come to him. Sorrowfully, she drew away, and he watched her, like a faded dream, pass from his sight.

When Magenta returned to the temple her countenance was carefully controlled, so that not one visible sign of anguish remained. It was a hollow, solitary place, with walls that seemed to lie in perpetual silence, absorbing everything that came to pass within. Here and there worshipers kneeled at prayer.

Magenta saw her father, Orsious, standing with the high priestess. They conversed in a tense and intimate fashion. Her father rarely came to the temple unless it was for a matter of great importance. He was an impressive

man in stature, his features strong and distinct rather than handsome. His age could not be less than seventy. Nevertheless, he was able, and inclined, to make any who doubted his authority feel it in the cruelest fashion.

Magenta hoped to pass them by without notice, when, without turning his face, but instead pointing his finger, Orsious said, “Don’t go far.” He had the unanswerable voice of authority which keeps one fearful, obedient. “I will speak with you in a moment.”

Magenta lingered near the base of the staircase, then went to observe some flowers that were of the deepest red, almost the colour of black blood. Not far from her father stood one of the rangers who worked for him. It was not necessary to possess the power of discriminating character to judge this man as savage. His unshaven face bore a sword-cut from temple to mouth. Rangers were rough and ready men, always able and willing to do violence on Orsious’s behalf. He waited like a guard posted behind the older man, regretting that he could not smoke. He had rather long, untidy brown hair. He seemed made to endure, fit to wield a sword with the greatest of ease. In every other respect he was a weak man.

Not required at present, Fraomar wandered over to Magenta, on whom his eyes had long lingered. His air was fierce, his step strong, but he was careful always to maintain some distance. The priestesses were considered nothing short of sacred and were both venerated and feared. Magenta maintained a reserve, distant and uncommunicative. Drifting about the room, she would pause and look at pictures that lined the walls. Her long figure and absorbed expression gave her an air of unattainability. He remained at her side, haunting every step of the beloved creature, her every movement watched with worship. The forced words and trivialities of speech were equally as oppressive as the silences.

Magenta came to stand by the inviting glow created by open-flame lamps. Fraomar waited at her side, standing as near to her as possible without drawing suspicious eyes in their direction. She was exquisitely remote, something unknown. Restless inside himself, Fraomar threw his head back, looking up at the ceiling. “It feels longer than three months that I’ve been gone,” he said. “Doesn’t it?”

“I suppose,” came the neutral reply.

He seemed to meditate awhile. Then, looking down at her, with strangely communicative eyes that filled her with unease, he said, “The time away has given me an opportunity to consider many things, of what’s important and meaningful. There is so much you just don’t recognize, till it is taken. And then you realise that it was there all the time—it was always there before your eyes. And then you are never the same, if you understand what I mean.”

This was received in silence.

“I overheard that you have been asked to commit yourself to an appointed office?” said Fraomar, in some doubt.

“Yes.”

“That’s what you’ll do then, is it?”

The face of the young woman darkened, but she looked downwards at her hands, immutably. The flame illumined the ranger’s hard face with an unnatural warmth, his eyes shining as he watched her, an illicit longing burning through his veins.

“I see that you suffer,” he said in a lowered voice, wetting his lips, an urgency to express his desires in the brief time they had alone. “But it need not be,” he added as he came a step closer, leaning as near to her as he dared. As his voice became lower and grew more intimate, his intentions became clearer. “You cannot be blind to the fact that you have captured my interest more than any other woman.” Magenta cast a piercing look into his keen eyes, but said nothing. “Let me take you away from here. You’re perishing. I can see how you wither for want of affection and common society.”

“Do not speak of things about which you know nothing.” She moved from his side, but he moved with her.

“How can I pretend I don’t see what is plain before my eyes,” he said in a tone of dismay unusual for him. “You’re like mist, perpetually dissolving. It burdens me to see you so. This is not your choice, I know. Are you certain you do not suffer needlessly?”

Magenta cast a plaintive sidelong glance over to where her father stood, unaware of her and the officious ranger, who was smothering her with his persistent and unrequested sympathies.

“He’ll never take you away from here,” said Fraomar. “He doesn’t know of your suffering. He has no care for your suffering.” Her eyes were dark and stricken when Magenta looked to Fraomar, and he grew hopeful and more anxious than ever before to secure favor in her heart. “Come away with me,” he said. “If not, you will continue to fade, to diminish, till youth and beauty are utterly spent, and all hope of love and happiness is unrecallably exhausted. In the midst of your darkest doubt, bound to grief and despair, there will be no beloved to hear your plaintive cries, to comfort and ease the pain which makes your heart grow so cold. You will be in darkness, and you will be alone.”

Fraomar continued in this vein. He wanted to appear sympathetic, hoping thereby to secure the elusive and ever-desired priestess, but he was not understanding or helping, only hurting. He would use fear and hopelessness in an attempt to imprison her in his own cage. She would not, however, go away with him. Should she leave with him, he would own her body, and she would merely exchange one misery for another. His mere presence harassed and provoked her. He seemed desperate to have her convinced of the grief she would endure without him.

He was perspiring. His roving, restless gaze settled on her lips, but he was so acutely aware of those who would punish him for such an action that he attempted nothing beyond taking her hand, glancing first over his shoulder to make certain they were unobserved. But even her hand she withheld from him.

Every time he visited, if they were alone, he made an attempt to touch her. He had a fixed notion that sometime she would let him. Brooding over her closely, he could not make out her expression. She looked as if she were

going to cry, yet her face remained composed, her lofty calm unbroken. She would not answer him, nor let him in on her thoughts. The persistent silence and impenetrability of this woman, whom his violent nature demanded, disconcerted him. He was unable to keep the silence, and said, “No man could be more devoted to you than I am. For long years I have loved you in silence. You cannot be ignorant of this.”

“Speak not another word.” She silenced him in a voice lower even than his own.

He remained quiet only a brief moment. The conviction that she was the woman for him urged him to continue. “You belong to me—the hope that you will come to this realization has sustained me.” Then he clenched his hands, pleading with her to renew his sentiments after she had time to pause and reconsider.

“I would rather you didn’t,” she said, her words like a knife. She made a move to leave. He took a step as if he would prevent it but merely remained at her side, anger mixed in his disappointment.

“You will be brought to reason,” he said. “It’s you and I together, and I’ll have you convinced before I’m through.”

To such arrogant persistence Magenta had no desire to respond. She left, silent and untouched. Fraomar watched after her vanishing form as she ascended the magnificent staircase. There was something immeasurably enraging in its cold forbiddance, in the utter impossibility of getting at her once she had retreated up it. He swallowed bitterly and blinked back the passion as he became aware of her father standing at his side, looking up also. Orsious looked angered that his daughter had disobeyed. “Send her down,” he demanded, the moment the high priestess joined them. “I will speak with her.”

“I shall have her see you tomorrow,” she said dismissively, for the single purpose of ensuring he remembered the abdication of all his rights the moment he had placed his daughter in her care all those years before.

“I will speak with her this night!”

Not shrinking from his anger, the high priestess remained persistent in her authority, yet accommodating for the sake of their alliance. “I shall see that she goes to you at first light.”

“Noon,” he said, handing over a piece of parchment. “And have her bring these things also.” His final word on the arrangement satisfied his feeling of control.

“I’ll attend to it, and see that you retrieve for me what I desire,” she said smoothly, and when he parted his lips to protest, she added coldly, “Spare no pains to acquire it.”

He relented and nodded. He could not refuse her. She provided him with things necessary for his life’s work, and she had possession of his greatest treasure, this side of death, and would not turn her against him.

Chapter 24
First Attempts

Late in the night, unable to sleep, Magenta went out into the garden where black hollyhock grew in abundance, clinging to and consuming the stone walls. The air was burdened with the perfume of many flowers, some of which only bloom under moonlight. The seductions of their scent, haunting and unsettling, mingled with the stillness of the night and induced a dim sense of longing and disquiet to any unfortunate enough to inhale the bitter sweetness of their commingled perfumes, which conveyed an elusive sense of some forbidden and hidden qualities.

Magenta drifted listlessly through the lonely, enclosed garden, her quiet carriage like the slow gentle sweeping of a breeze. It was not a prim establishment with well-tended flower beds but was dark and overgrown, choked with plants that seemed to mourn and to shy from flaunting their graces. Yet the garden was of uncommon beauty, its vanities characterised by a sweetness, shaded with sorrow, and subdued by resignation rather than passionate life.

However, not all the garden was in sedate beauty. Lurking within the melancholy was a sting of treachery. Plants were apt to seize and torment any who ventured too near. Their caustic flesh would sting and irritate and burn. Not all the perfumes which sweetened the air were kind. Many were decidedly injurious, burdening the air, verging on the excessive. Yet the very worst was not to be wholly despised. Its attributes often inspired sentiments of yearning and insufferable desire, tempting the organ of smell insatiably.

Resting in its shadow, a stranger leaned against the stone wall. The figure was hidden by darkness, but the stature and broadness of shoulder indicated it was a man. He watched the form of beauty in her every motion, eagerly, greedily.

As she approached, the unshaven, disheveled figure of the ranger languidly stepped out into view. “Four times I sent request to have you see me,” he began, hoping at once to gain her sympathy. “What a torment a woman can be!”

Magenta greeted him without smiling and waited for him to come forward to her, as she knew he would. She was dismayed to find herself alone with him but would not let him see. “The hour is late,” she said with a shade of reproof.

“And yet here you are,” he said, antagonistic, “wandering the garden, alone.” He moved toward her gradually, cautiously, so that she would not attempt an escape before he was near enough to prevent it. “I wasn’t expecting to speak with you until morning,” he said, as if addressing a long known friend.

“Perhaps I shall leave and not disappoint your expectations,” she replied but did not act upon the statement: although he made no such attempt, he positioned himself in such a way as to give her the impression that should she provoke such an action, he would lurch and seize her.

“I will not hold you here,” he said, as if her thoughts could be read plainly on her face. “But first I will plead that you stay awhile and listen. I wish to speak on a subject important to your future happiness.” He did not allow her look of mistrust to discourage him. “You will not ask me the nature of the subject?”

“My freedom?” she said. There was no sarcasm, but contempt and suspicion in her voice.

“Yes.” Fraomar smiled, though he was filled with a sore irritability. “Have you given consideration to my offer?”

“There is no need. Without reflection, my answer is the same as before.”

“You gave no answer before,” he said, then added as he came closer, “Now that we are alone, let us talk openly together.” His look urged her to mistrust him more wholly than she had previously.

“There is nothing to be said between us that has not already been spoken,” she said, removing herself from his reach and walking over to where a thick flowering vine grew, hanging down with insufferable indolence. Fraomar watched the delicate creature, feeling relaxed and calm. He felt now that he had her in the seclusion of the garden, with only himself and the plants, that he was in command of the situation. She could not put him off.

“Mind yourself,” she cautioned, “not to brush too close by them.”

He saw the plant of which she warned him, and with a smile, moved from its grasp. For a time he left her to herself, then to renew conversation said, “You are to see your father tomorrow?” His eyes looked to where a pretty flower hung carelessly near to her face. “Perhaps afterwards, for a short moment, you would permit me to see you, away from here?”

As he spoke he approached near. She did not withdraw but stood constrained, untouchable, her contemptuous eyes fastened on him. In his hand he materialized a dagger, swiftly cut down the pendulous blossom and took it in his hand. Then with a languid gesture, the same insufferable ease with which he conjured it, he dismissed the weapon with a smile on his face. He knew the use of magic at the temple was forbidden and took a strange pleasure in it. To Magenta he offered the flower, which she did not take. Despite her refusal, already his heart began to beat high with the hope of success. He felt from her the clinging, faltering resistance that precedes surrender.

The refused flower he did not toss aside, but instead, lowering his face, offered himself. He would, within plain sight, taste of her lips. He no longer cared. “They will not see,” he said, lifting his hand to caress her. She withdrew before the touch of rough fingers had chance even to brush her cheek.

“You forget yourself and the customs of my kind,” she said.

There was something that angered yet amused him about the lofty manner in which she disregarded his entreaties. With a peculiar, quivering smile, he bowed his face to the flower, caressing his lips with the soft

petals. The scent made him shudder. It was hurtfully sweeter than she. From over the blossom he observed her in silence, and she remained the same elusive creature whose secret soul he could never touch. She did not meet his advances as he had hoped. She did not, however, succeed in making a man with such determination hopeless. He tossed the flower aside and said coldly, “It might assist you a little to estimate your obligations to the priestesshood, if you knew—”

“There is nothing you can tell me I don’t already know of their infamies,” she answered, equally as coldly.

“Then why remain with them? You cannot believe what is told to be anything but false. You know of what they do. Perhaps it is that your heart has turned as black as theirs?”

She did not answer, but as he looked at her it seemed to him that she was somehow defeated. Nevertheless, she did not lower her eyes.

He went up to her and, in a low voice, said, “I can take you away from all this; just speak the word.” His face was shrewd and intelligent, rather than tender and sympathetic. He already exulted in her capture.

Magenta wondered with dismay how she had fallen prey to such a man. It was not known quite what he was capable of, but that he was a man of uncommon gifts was plain.

“Why do you look alarmed?” he said, bewildered. “I cannot think of reasons for you to refuse.” He passed a hand over his brow. He began to suffer mildly. The odour of the flowers was oppressive. The untended plants had abundant disregard of space and the breathing of others, yet he could not have longed for space around them. He felt that now, within this moment, while alone, he must get her settled upon him.

“Tell me,” he said, his voice gentler. “What are your wishes? What aim do you pursue?” She remained before him, her dark, steady eyes fixed on his wild, excited ones. “I wish to know and understand you. I can help, if you would speak with me.” In excitement he drew forward an inch. “You

recoil from me," he said, almost amused. "If I didn't know you well enough, I should think you were trying to play a game with me."

The idolator kept close watch over his valuable prize. He knew she was mistrustful of him.

"I only ask that you allow me to ease your suffering," he said in a tone he believed persuasive, then with horrid suggestiveness: "It won't hurt, I swear." He stretched forth a hand for her to come. When she did not, her cold response roused fitful gleams within the eyes previously voluptuous in their attention. "These words would lose their bitterness if you would but allow me a single chance," he said, becoming intolerable.

He found it difficult to breathe the air, trying to inhale as little of the noxious vapours as possible. He began to feel their ill-effects. They did not affect her. She breathed with the same ease she would the purest air, and he knew her very blood must be tainted. "Let me take you from here," he persisted. "Leave this place. It's riddled with darkness and suffering. There's nothing here for you but falsehoods and hopelessness. The very air you breathe is a malicious fume. There is no sensible reason to refuse, and I cannot believe you a fool …There is nothing here for you but death."

Magenta stood as one paralyzed. She felt herself overcome with the same anguish that had seized upon her before at his speech.

"I know what you would say," he ventured to speak in the absence of response. "You believe she will not allow it. She uses fear and despair to destroy all hope. But I know of places that are safe, where no one will know who you are, where she cannot find you. There is hope for you yet."

"It's long since I've had any hope," Magenta answered sadly, cautious of him still.

"But why?" he asked, madly perplexed. "If you would come with me I could help you be at peace, start afresh!" After a time he added coolly, "I'm all you have—of that single truth you may be certain."

“My hope does not rest on a single certainty,” Magenta said, at last regaining her self-possession. She remained distant and never let his strong hands get in reach of her. It was her preference to throw herself into the black water and be drowned rather than to have this man lay his hands on her.

He was dismayed that she was unkind to him and would not give him a chance. “Why do you stand so far away?” He looked to her with tormented eyes. She would not go to him, and he would not venture to force her. He was savage, prepared to resort to any form of cruelty to get his own way, but fear of the consequences such an action would produce paralyzed his yearning. “You know what I feel for you, do you not?” he inquired, helplessly.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps, then,” he continued, agitated, “you do not know the depths to which I feel it.” He swallowed with difficulty. His supreme request that she unveil the mysteries of her kind was so needful it hurt.

“I fear I do,” was the brief reply.

The pallor that overspread his countenance, the clench of his jaw, and the tremor in his voice, told at once she had touched a tender chord. “Then why do you keep from me? Why do you treat me with only contempt and coldness?” He watched her closely. She would not support the conversation, keeping always out of his reach.

“There is not sufficient audience to give reason for you to shun me as you do,” he said, his tone ever increasing in fervor, resentful of the reluctance she had shown him and the distress he suffered. Persistently he sniffed and rubbed his irritated eyes. His flesh felt prickly and twitchy. The ill-effects of the commingled perfumes had him in keen, aromatic pain. Their burning sweetness scalded the tongue and eyes with caustic severity. Another man would have been seized with violent sickness.

“Have you nothing to say?” he demanded finally, much excited that several of his attempts to renew the conversation were ineffectual. “You

have yet to answer my question."

"Would you have my answer?"

"Yes," he said. "I would have it."

Magenta looked at him long and steadily. "Then let it be understood that there is, and never can be, even a breath of hope beyond the notion of acquaintance for you and me."

For a long moment Fraomar regarded her. His set smile belied the intense hate in his eyes. He despised and was infatuated with her within the same moment. He rubbed his eyes furiously. He began to suffer giddiness. The mingled scents seemed with deliberate and purposeful intent to get inside his brain and drive him to insanity.

"You think me unworthy of your esteem," he said, his voice tight. "Perhaps there is another?"

The mere thought of another man's attainment of the unattainable, roused in him a fierce jealousy, that by some perversity, increased by the impossibility of his own success, heightened his desire. His want for her unsatisfiable, he fought a mad desire to force from her some sign of feeling, anything but this aloof indifference.

Profoundly agitated, Fraomar had until now retained the appearance of self-command, when, seized with a sudden attack of weakness, he turned recklessly upon a hapless plant, tore it half-down and cried, "Tell me there is another, and I shall cut out his heart!"

His eyes were mad with suffering. A hot flame ran in his blood. He wanted to get hold of her. When she had roused him into a fit of madness he felt he would kill her. Magenta was struck with the sudden change that appeared in his countenance but remained unmoved.

"There is no other," she said calmly.

Fraomar, believing that a heart such as hers had not the strength to bear the cold alone, was convinced there must be another. For a long while he looked into her face as if to reach into the very heart of her and uncover the secret love which she kept hidden there. Suddenly he drew very close to her, filled with the mad jealousy and the delusion of hope of one desperately infatuated.

“Then I would leave now, if I might carry with me a hope of being permitted to renew my sentiments—when you’ve had time enough to reconsider,” he said, trembling all over as he spoke. His eyes looked as if they hurt him. They burned and stung from emotion and from the torment of poisonous vapours.

“You have my answer,” replied Magenta. “Take it and be done with it.”

“I see I have nothing to hope for.” There was an expression of caustic despair on his countenance, but his defeat was false. Never before had he been denied, and he would not be denied her. Whether she wished it or not, he would tear from her the veil of mystery. “And you are to tell me there is no other?” he said doubtfully.

“There is no one.”

“That can be amended.”

“It has no need for amendment,” she said.

Her standing there like that, soft and passive, but unknown, untouchable, enraged him beyond measure. “I believe you are made of marble,” he said scornfully. He had grown white with anger. “You are to tell me you are sorrowless, without need and without fear?”

“I say none of those things,” she answered. “Only I wish not for companionship.”

Drunk on the garden’s perfume, the benighted ranger yielded at last to his passionate nature. His body was pained with an unmitigated longing, and with his body he expressed it. “Tonight at least you shall!” He broke

forth with sudden violence, and seizing her, made an attempt to lay his wild lips on hers.

Swiftly she retreated out of arm's length, and to his dismay, he discovered it impossible to follow. The black vines had made quick work round his arms and legs, preventing the forward movement he attempted. He had not perceived them creeping upon him. "Curse you!" he cried in a fury, with a face made of hate itself. He struggled against the snare with a force made of wounded pride, hatred, and desire unsatisfied. After a short minute he had exhausted himself and momentarily let his head droop in agonized defeat. When he looked up there were tears in his eyes, but she, turning to leave, did not see.

"Magenta," he whimpered in a voice so meek, and so weakly uttered, it passed unheard. "Magenta, I'm sorry." He had not intended to make his voice so pathetic. At last he cried: "Magenta!" He sent a desperate plea after her not to leave, but she did not heed his cries. A violent exclamation tore from his throat, and he wrenched his arm savagely in the viney ensnarement, as if he might tear it from its very roots. He wept as he spoke: "Those walls will be your grave! Death will find you alone and in darkness!"

His voice rang clear in the night and shook her bleak soul. He knew the very thing she feared would come to pass; she would be locked away within that terrible darkness, alone, hopeless, desolate, left to wither and deteriorate with no sympathetic soul to hear her cries. This gave him a strange satisfaction.

Chapter 25
Emporium

The morning was grey and oppressive, the streets cheerless and damp. The spell book emporium was occupied by men and women who made not a sound, but for the periodic turning of pages, and a murmur over something here and there.

Against a quiet wall, lying in wait, Fraomar stood in the hope of encountering Magenta. He knew she was to see her father sometime in the day. There was a musky, sweet odour of parchment scrolls in the room, which stifled him. He suffered mildly an after-sickness. He had been left to endure intense aromatic distress, mental anguish, and disorientation from the many potent fragrances.

So here he waited, prepared to make excuses for the previous night's violent outburst. He would tell her in the most ardent and earnest tones that his efforts had been incited by the necessity of her love, without which he might perish, and, but though she had left him hopeless, he still adored her deeply and worshiped her intensely. These things he thought about, till he was again convinced of success. He promised himself he should have her soon. Her heart could not live without affection. Lost and forsaken, where else should she run but to his love, so constant and faithful?

The street was filled by many bleak figures. As Deacon approached the emporium, he saw coming toward him, on the opposite side, his cousins and Cade. He dropped his chin, trying to remain inconspicuous. They had not yet seen him there. Making his way purposefully through the moving figures, he kept his face tilted down, hoping to escape notice. At the entrance he paused. He would have liked to have quickly turned and gone inside, but, perceiving himself recognized, stood and waited patiently, while the others crossed over to join him.

"Thought we might find you here!" Derek said, cheerfully.

Deacon greeted them without smiling, and they followed him inside.

“What do you do with yourself all the blessed day?” asked Cade. “Read these books? He looked at a cover as though he had found something of great interest, but after a quick flip through, tossed it aside unimpressed.

“Yes,” said Deacon with a shade of annoyance.

Taking the lead from Cade, Derek took up a book also. He frowned as his eyes came across pages and pages of some damnable writing, unintelligible to him.

“What have you there?” Deacon asked, displaying more eagerness than was common with him. “Give it to me.”

Before Derek had chance to register what he had asked, Deacon had snatched the book from his hands, flipped through the leaves with a haste that told of singular purpose, then with a scornful grimace snapped shut the cover, so sharply as to make Derek flinch.

“What?” asked Derek. “Why are you enraged?”

“It’s not what I supposed it to be,” said Deacon, pushing the book back into Derek’s hands.

“What is it that you are specifically looking for?” asked Cedrik.

“It’s not something easily explained,” was all Deacon said, and Cedrik knew well enough he could extract nothing more from him.

It was divination Deacon desired. He had found several books on the subject, but so far they had been inadequate for what he required. “You might as well entertain yourselves elsewhere,” he said. “I cannot estimate how long I’ll be here.”

“I’m content where I am,” said Cedrik, making himself comfortable in a chair. His look indicated mistrust and displeasure at Deacon’s secrecy.

Derek looked uncomfortable between the two, the tension between them quite apparent. He took a seat by his brother, who knocked his boots down from the table where he had lounged them. “Are we truly to remain here all the day?” he asked Cedrik in dismay.

“Not me,” Cade said, slumping into a chair across from them. “I’ve got work later this afternoon …Hey there, look at this fool, then.” He nodded across the room to where Fraomar stood, absent-mindedly forming a dagger, then re-forming it after he had dismantled it. He repeated this aimlessly over and over, his eyes fixed to the floor. The storekeeper had remonstrated with him for public display of unauthorized magic use but had been just as severely turned away.

“You have to love these fools who throw their weight around, just because they know a few magic tricks,” said Cade scornfully, though Cedrik noticed he lowered his voice as he spoke.

Deacon, forced to endure their company, turned as if blind to them and took another leather-bound book.

“These books are his only reason for existence, I reckon,” said Cade. “The damned fool.”

Deacon stood aloof with cynical reserve. He was clad in dark clothes, as though it was his wish to fade into the shadows, yet he was singularly striking, standing out from the rest. He made the atmosphere around him seem darker, fuller, enlivened.

An even rarer study than Deacon was the dark priestess. Her entrance caused an unsettling stir in the room. She swept in, and it was as if a dark breeze had passed, all becoming chilly with a deep sense of unease. She was exceedingly still, beautifully still. There was an estrangement between her and all things natural, as though she was unknown even to nature. She troubled all who looked upon her. Her appearance suggested hopelessness, despair, even death.

She recognized Deacon immediately, turning her eyes on him as she passed. The intensity of her gaze must have drawn his, for he looked up

suddenly. He sustained her gaze unfalteringly, but then she, upon perceiving Fraomar, turned her face forward and would not look towards him again. The moment her eyes broke from his, Deacon felt severed from her, divided, as if she was blind to him. There was something very compelling about her beauty, her smooth black hair and terrible blue eyes. She had a nameless grace, so soft, so calm, so beautiful in her darkness, the night might have taken vengeance for envy of her.

Even with all his familiarity with beauty, Deacon was compelled to admit to himself that never before had he been impressed with such loveliness. Sorrow had refined her, polishing away any coarseness and bringing her to a finer state of being. Yet there was that in her beauty to cause a deep dread within him, one he could not explain, even to himself. She gave him the strong impression she had lived through some experience, some terrible suffering that had removed her from ordinary society. Deacon soon observed others beside himself were watching the priestess. She drew many eyes and many more whispers. The striking black gown and graceful form beneath could account for the lingering interest, but not the disquietude.

He saw that she encountered a man eager for her attention. His insistent, overbearing presence urged her into the seclusion of a quiet corner, where he might speak to her more intimately. Distracted by the priestess and the man with whom she spoke, Deacon did not return at once to study, but watched. The man was of a good height, and to a less refined eye, handsome. Yet she seemed distant from him. Her distance went beyond maidenly reserve. Almost she was marble, with no tendency to soften, cold and impervious.

Having her to himself, Fraomar expressed his regret and told her of the agony that filled his soul. While he pleaded his case, Magenta remained quiet and unreadable. His words fell cold upon her heart. Often her gaze would stray past the ranger and over to Deacon, who glanced up from his book on occasion. Her eyes lingered on him long after his had turned downward.

Fraomar, conscious of this divided attention, looked over his shoulder to observe what took her interest. He saw the dark-haired young man whose

attention had since returned to the page and felt hostile toward him. Deacon's gaze lifted just as Fraomar turned and positioned himself more directly in front of her to block the view. He stood very close to her, bending foward.

"You show me no sympathy," he said, his tone lowered, yet aggressive.

"I cannot show what I do not have."

"How can you be so indifferent to my suffering?" he argued. "I was not myself—the fumes had got inside my head."

"I believe you were more yourself than ever before," she replied, evenly.

"And you know who I am so assuredly?" he asked with a sense of injustice. "All the years you have known me, I have been faithful to your father, mindful of you. How can you perceive me as despisable?"

"How can I not perceive what you conceal so carelessly?" she asked, looking him in the eyes.

He was silent a moment. A muscle worked in his jaw. "Perhaps I should leave you to your fate. I offered you freedom, and you have thrown it in my face."

"Is it freedom you offer?"

"You know it is," he said. "You have lived your whole life drifting in some half-dream. Give me your trust, and I swear to wake you to full existence."

Then, bending down farther, he began to speak to her in a very low voice, talking almost into her ear. The sight chafed the mind of Deacon. He watched curiously from under his wary black lashes. What was he pressing the woman to do?

Fraomar whispered to Magenta brasher words than he had ever before used, coercing her with bitter half-truths, urging her acceptance of him. He

was obsessed with her kind, they who with their infinitely superior charms alone could pass heightened intoxications in passion and who could at any time leave a healthy firm-fleshed man in utter degradation, trembling, for surely his extreme bliss brought him to the utmost pitch of joy that man can bear. When at last Fraomar withdrew his face to look her full in the eyes, her eyes lifted with dismay. Her voice was a mere breath.

“Why do you ask these things of me?”

“Because it is you who has so deeply marked my existence,” he said. “Do these things for me, and I will see that you want for nothing. If it is within my reach, I swear you shall have it.” He misunderstood her silence to be consideration. “I have made all the declarations. Where now is your promise to me?” He raised his finger toward her breast.

She dashed aside his hand. He caught her wrist, sudden as a snare. “A strong beating would bring you to your senses,” he said through clenched teeth, gripping her painfully. Her expression darkened with anger. She did not attempt to break free but simply stood there, looking into him with eyes that were both beautiful and terrible.

Fraomar watched with a horrible fascination as the veins in his hand became distended and purple beneath the flesh, travelling up the forearm. Poison, he knew, was entering his flesh and his blood. He choked with the increasing pain, yet did not withdraw or release his hold, nor did he lower his gaze from that of the priestess’.

Her expression did not show any active or malicious intent of evil but an absence of any sympathy. Obstinately he clutched her, resisting the painful effects with faltering courage, and at last, was forced to release her. He gripped his wounded hand, sweat heavy on his brow. His look of defeat was soon quenched with immutable conviction.

“The next time I get hold of you, I’ll not let go,” he said, his face very near to hers. “You can’t play with me.”

She did not shrink from him but burned cold with resentment. Deacon hadn’t quite seen what occurred between the two, only that she had done

something unfortunate to the man. He saw also that it was she who terminated the conversation. They parted and each went their separate ways, she to the counter to retrieve some books, he out of the place altogether. His agitation was still so apparent that several people scrambled to avoid contact with him.

“What in the gods’ name went on there?” asked Cade, who had also been watching. “That man is mad.”

Deacon returned to his previous occupation as if no one had spoken, but his mind was seriously abraded.

Cade shook his head. “I pity the fellow who climbs into bed with her; he will be crawling out, I can tell you that much. Not all the ale in the world could make me—”

Cade fell into silence as the priestess passed. Doing so, she did not neglect to exchange a meaningful glance at Deacon. He was struck by the pallid apathy of her face. Her expression suggested despair. He remembered the pale tearful face in the woods and was moved to a deeper tenderness toward her.

Cade scratched the rusty coloured bristles on his chin. Not until she had left, did he resume speaking. “They get a fellow all worked up, only to deny the very kisses she sighed for, and then accuse them of being stolen, but in a style so prettily put on, it only provokes more. She wants to lure a man to his destruction. All her protests and such, pfft. She is far wiser than to mean it, if you understand what I’m saying. She aims at luring him into almost unconsciousness, then once he is good and powerless, weak as a full-bellied drunk, she will destroy him.

“They play this game, then wonder why men like that fool cause them so much strife. You feel bad, sometimes, you know—those men can be dangerous, but a creature like that is just asking for it. And the sweet thing you saw just now is no different; you can see it in the way she moves and the linger in her glances. A woman like that cries injustice when really she’s just a—”

His torrent of abuse was cut off midway—Deacon, who had until then restrained himself, gave way to an outburst of temper. He confronted Cade roughly, forcing him against the bookcase. “Speak of her again as such, and you’ll have a heavy score to settle with me.” His voice trembled with barely constrained violence. It is a dangerous thing to criticize the source of a man’s more gentler feelings.

Cade, truly alarmed, fell mute. He felt a painful numbing sensation in the hand that had been seized and looked down to discover the flesh had taken on a bluish hue, as if touched by a bitter frost.

A booming voice, that of the storekeeper, came across the room. “There will be none of that in here! Leave, before I report you for misconduct!”

Cade winced and tried to pull his hand free. Deacon released him and went to the door. Cade shook his head pityingly. “He has gone hopelessly beyond recall, poor bastard.” He rubbed life back into his hand. “Like attracts like, I suppose.”

Disgusted by all that had occurred, Cedrik gave him a sharp glance before starting after Deacon.

“What?” asked Cade, perplexed and looking to Derek, who sat disconcerted and serious.

“Deacon!” Cedrik called and hurried after him. The pursued continued as if deaf and did not respond. “Deacon, wait! I need to speak with you!” Cedrik reached out and took hold of his arm.

Deacon, still wrathful, turned on his cousin abruptly. “Will you cease to follow me about like a wretched beggar!” He tore his arm free, then continued at a solid pace down the street, losing himself among the crowd.

A stone path, cold and wet, led up to a depressing structure that was the mage’s guild. Magenta went to her father’s study to give him the books he had requested. Her visits with him were never pleasant. It was a mystery to her why he ever insisted on her society. He seemed to take little delight in her company, yet she was somehow still duty-bound to visit him.

The study was scrupulously organized. Her father sat at an impressive writing table, working over some old scrolls. The moment she entered he said, “You may put them there.” He did not lift his eyes, and with his quill indicated the corner of the table. He did not embrace her in welcome, nor did he clutch her in his frustration. With a careful and decided manner, he set down the quill and laced his fingers, looking over them to his daughter. He was boiling with temper, though one less acquainted with him would never know it.

“Unpleasant occurrences have come to my attention,” he said in the deep-vibrating voice that so many feared. Magenta knew he was not speaking of the many infamies to which the priestesses could lay claim, but of the interference on her part. He knew of the abominable things they engaged in, the unjust ecclesiastical power they asserted, yet did nothing to hinder them. He required the assistance of their knowledge and was careful never to injure his accord with them. “Do tell me,” he said fiercely, “that you have not so far forgotten all principles and obedience as to compromise my relationship and subject all I have worked for to failure.”

Magenta placed the books where instructed. She was softly spoken yet undaunted. “I would not intentionally subject anyone to peril,” she stated, cryptically. “And should it be within my power to prevent it, I shall.” For only a brief moment did she lift her gaze to his.

“There are discretions and delicacies we must practice in order to protect those who may be misjudged in their choice of sanctities,” he said in a precise, unwavering tone. “You know well as any what it is to be persecuted for a different choice of faith. We have, you and I both, formed an agreement, entered into a sacred covenant, and every dictate of reason and of fidelity impels me to honor it.”

“And you do not feel it is depraved and empty, honor that is paid to those with contaminated moral sense?”

The alacrity, intensity, and sureness expressed in her reply amazed him for a moment. He regarded her, perfectly collected and free from excitement, then exclaimed in a voice as severe as he could command. “Do not pretend to understand the inherent complexities of moral certainty, or

the distinction between truth and impression. There will be strict observance of promises made. The high priestess has spoken in depth with me and requests that all obligation be honoured at the appointed hour, and nothing shall, I assure you, without my consent, interfere with these duties.

“She is your superior and, next to me, has the first claim upon your obedience. I have invested her with this authority, and so long as she remains accountable for your education, you will have the goodness to obey. I have always found you a dutiful and obedient child and expect no other conduct from you. I will make certain you have no chance for excommunication.”

“You will not give me a chance for life, you mean,” she answered, saddened, yet full of challenge.

“Be content—there are those worse off than yourself,” he said, hard and uncomforting. “Surely your eyes have often seen the beggars in the street, the degradation and obscenities that lurk in hidden corners, forced by the hand of necessity, those that pass their days and nights in the agony of want, existing merely for death? Do you truly believe yourself marked by deprivation? They would think you mocked them if you told them such thoughts. Who shall say what reproof they will not call down?”

She could give no favourable answer and so remained quiet, painfully aware how numb her heart seemed to grow under his gaze. She had learned long before not to argue with her father; he had taught her that confrontation only resulted in him subduing her by any method accessible to him.

“There is no need to wander about, seeking diversion or galavanting off with men. You serve a higher purpose and will receive higher rewards.” Orsious lifted his quill as if to continue work, but a tense sensation in his throat prevented him. His cheeks were blanched, mottled with excitement, and something like a scowl was blackening his hard, insipid face. “If you insist on making trouble for me,” he said. “I shall be forced to make moves to ensure it is no longer possible.”

That was all he said on the subject, returning to the scrolls he deciphered, but there was something so hideous in the cold venom with which he presented the prospect that as soon as he spoke, there returned to her that agony of heart which the stimulus of her passion had thrown off for a time. His face bent down, he seemed little conscious of her presence. She lingered only a moment, then started for the door.

“Where are you going?” He looked up from under stern brows. “You may remain here for a time.”

Magenta took herself over by the window and looked down into the streets below. Seldom did she glance toward her father. He was unapproachable and impenetrable. The bond they should have shared between them was wholly absent. She wondered if he had ever taken her into his arms, but she could remember no such time and doubted even whether she had ever once loved him.

Chapter 26
Dark Grove

The sun had sunk so low as to fill the woods with sombre shadows. The trees, tall and straight, had a spectral, miserable appearance, a listless beauty in which nothing stirred. The air, half-mist, was cold and thin. Magenta drifted at leisure, walking with sweeping grace. In her aspect was the majesty of night and all that is best of the dark.

In a grove Deacon sat upon a fallen tree, a book balanced on his knee, deeply absorbed. It was a place where few ever seemed to venture and had quickly become a favourite haunt of his. He was not long here before he glimpsed the maiden through the gloom. Slowly he raised his eyes to watch her. In the mist she looked faded and beautiful. He thought she might come to him, but she remained there aloof. When she spoke it was in a low and pleasant voice.

“How long within this wood do you intend to stay?”

“Why do you ask?” he said, regarding her with some suspicion.

“The night will soon be drawing in,” she replied. “It is not wise to linger after dark.”

“I have seen what lingers here after dark,” he said. “They fear me.” In recognition of her concern, he spoke with a gentler tone, “If it will ease your mind, I’ll stay only as long as there is light enough to read.”

Nothing more was spoken in words, yet silent communication passed between them. Magenta gave a curious, lingering gaze before she moved on, her train following behind.

Rain gently pattered down on the cottage roof. At the kitchen table Cade and Derek played cards, while Cedrik, next to the old woman, dried the dishes she washed and handed to him. “I don’t know how you city lads

usually play the rules," began Cade, in an accusatory tone, "but in my books that's considered cheating!" With both eyebrows raised, Derek looked indignant and guilty at the same time.

"That is cheating," confirmed Cedrik, watching the game as he dried a dish vigorously. Derek threw him a discouraging glance; he thought his brother a traitor.

Cade leaned across the table. "Which would you prefer," he said, his raised palm poised to strike, "your left or your right?"

Derek shrugged audaciously. "Both are fine choices—" He had only got the last word out, and took a rapid-slap to both the left and right cheek. "Can we move on now?" he asked, unscrunching his face.

"Proceed," said Cade, sinking back to his seat, content to have had some retribution.

They paused in their game. They had heard the front door close. A moment later Deacon passed without so much as a glance. His hair clung to his neck in dark wet strands.

"Hey, where have you been, then?" Cade shouted, still holding his cards in front, listening.

No response came.

"You will catch your death, boy!" the old woman called after Deacon from the doorway, reproachfully. She saw him make his way up the stairs. She knew he had heard. Cursing him for his obstinance, she returned dutifully to the dishes.

"Did you see how guilty the devil looked?" suggested Cade. "Probably he's been off with one of those black-hearted women." Fear of Deacon prevented him from speaking in stronger terms. "I'd want to kiss one, too, if their lips weren't poison!" He separated a card and slapped it down on the table, not conscious of his choice. "Wait, that's the wrong one." He stretched out a hand to retrieve it, but Derek slapped the hand aside.

“Once it’s down, it’s down!”

The night passed in tortured unrest. In his bed Deacon was haunted by images of the priestess. Tormented in a half-sleep, he dreamed of her. Beneath black water, cold and dark, she was trapped. The surface was frozen over. Forlorn hands pressed against the frosty cover in a vain attempt to break free. With a sense of hopeless resignation she sank, sinking, sinking, into darker depths, her white arms raised above as if reaching for something unattainable. Deep beneath, all became still and calm. No longer did she struggle. Suspended there, abandoned in a dark, weightless world, among feeble streams of luminance, she was so helpless, so beautiful. Her swaying tangle of long, dark hair, concealing gentle features, drifted free, and her face emerged, pale and depleted of spirit. Her clear-seeing eyes were set on him with despairing, mute appeal, as if she could see into the very heart of him.

Almost he felt as if he was there with her, that if he reached out he could touch her. Always she was just out of reach. He wanted to hold her. He could sense her profound loneliness, but it was as if he didn’t exist. There was only her and her pain. In hopeless desperation her pale lips moved inaudibly, forming words he could not read. Instinctively Deacon knew it was him she called for. He would break the surface for her, but he was as if weighed down by some unbearable weight. He watched, powerless, as her tortured, withheld breath became intolerable to her. For a moment she writhed helplessly, turning away her face, her cries drowned. Again her gaze settled on him. A deep silence throbbed between them. She was white and still. Her hair floated about her face and shoulders, haunting and ghostly, her breath almost gone. The wavering light trembled over her pale, dying features. With an effort of great will, Deacon drew as close to her as he could. He wanted to place his mouth upon hers and give her his breath. As he reached for her, almost touching her, she, with startling suddenness, began to struggle, so violently Deacon was startled awake.

He was relieved to find it morning. He lay flat on the bed, the blankets kicked aside. His hands trembled slightly.

“Night terrors? said Cade, from the far side of the room, sitting hunched over, only just awakened. “You thrashed the damned bed.”

Deacon glanced at Cade as he got to his feet.

“Go to the window if you’re going to be sick,” said Cade, seeing Deacon’s complexion pale notably. He himself blanched under the look he received, half-expecting the mage to lay hold of him again.

“Where is Cedrik?” asked Deacon, noting the empty bed.

“He’s gone into town to buy food.”

Deacon nodded absently. Then, unexpectedly, he said, “We are fortunate that you allow us to stay here.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Cade, in bewilderment at the mage’s change of attitude toward him.

The moment Deacon stepped outside, the morning air sobered him. The pitiful wailing of a distressed child came to his ear. As he rounded the cottage and went down the side he saw at the steps of a dilapidated house, a woman in a wretched state of poverty. A baby was cradled in her arm and a small child on her hip. She was trying to balance the distraught children while struggling with an ungainly tattered bag. She appeared unwell, coughing as if in the early stage of a serious illness. Deacon stood a moment, watching to see if she required his assistance. The distress of the woman overshadowed his own pain.

Magenta, who had only moments before departed the boat which bore her across the water, also heard the desperate wailing. The cries led her down among the cottages where she halted, drawing back slightly so she might observe unseen. She watched as the poor woman made her way up the broken steps and into the house. Deacon followed close behind with the two children. He held the baby in one arm and lifted the child in the other, her head resting on his shoulder. Deacon bowed his head, whispering to the baby, which then cried no more.

For a short moment Magenta remained there watching, waiting. Presently Deacon returned by himself and began to walk down along the lake. His heavy cloak enveloped him up to the chin. Magenta saw in his

bearing that he had proud blood in his veins, yet he carried himself quietly. There was about him a peculiar darkness of reserve. His very walk bore the air of one in great torment.

She at once thought him beautiful. She did not see him place the coins in the woman's dirty hand, nor how tenderly he had laid the children down in their beds, but it was not necessary. He had already touched her. That he should care about the wretched woman and her children was proof enough of his benevolent spirit. She followed him into the woods. He sat on the fallen tree in the same secluded spot where she had seen him before. Now at least she knew where to find him.

Even in the day the woods were dark and cheerless. Maintaining a certain remoteness, Magenta watched him. He was so alluring in his stillness and mystery—his expression serious and profound, so intent upon his occupation, that, exceptionally keen of hearing as he was, he remained entirely unaware that anyone observed him.

From this elusive distance Magenta adored him. He was strikingly handsome. His face was smooth-shaven, with features that were strong and clear-cut in their outlines. The gravity of his presence drew her toward him steadily and persistently. She moved as smoothly and soundlessly as an apparition, yet Deacon, perhaps sensing her presence, soon looked up. The traction of his blue eyes, as they followed her, was so intense she at once desired to speak with him, a desire that was increased by the fact that they were alone with one another. As if hesitant to advance straight upon him, she lingered among the trees, weaving in and around, slowly drawing nearer and nearer, with eyes that did not just see through or pass over, but gave penetrating recognition to his existence. In her darkness she was beautiful, she was as the night—soft, sensuous, mysterious.

"What study absorbs you so fully you cease to be human in your needs?" she asked, her voice smooth and low-spoken. An expression of inquiry crossed his features. "You have been here for many hours," she said, venturing forward.

Deacon regarded her with some suspicion. It disconcerted him that she had been aware of his presence, but he not of hers. He remained seated. A

book lay spread on his lap. Tentatively, she lifted the cover which bore the title of what he was studying.

“Divination,” she said, without interest or scorn.

Deacon said nothing, his eyes intent on her. Even now, a vague dread clung to her. Her face had beautiful lines, delicate, and refined. Her lips were lovely and soft. He had originally supposed her eyes to be her finest feature but considered them now her worst, with something verging on the unnatural about them. She lifted them to him, and he grew rigid.

“Who are you?” he asked in his unemotional way. “I wish to know.”

“I am priestess and servant, partisan, to Death’s plea.”

“I’ve heard other names not so pretty,” said Deacon. There was nothing in his expression to suggest intent to injure, but she knew he was, at least in part, mistrustful of her. “I meant what is your name?” he said, more affably.

All this time she had not known his name, any more than he had ever pronounced her own, but it mattered little. Neither cared for the things supposed necessary to people found in ordinary intercourse. Yet when they had exchanged names, both felt a coming together, an intense resonance and intimacy. He feared this enthrallment to be merely his darkness responding to her darkness, yet he was far too keen an observer to believe her nature could harmonize with what was supposed of her and her kind.

“Do you not fear wandering such woods alone?” he asked.

“No,” she answered, bleakly. “I am accustomed to it.” Something in her look made him feel their painful nearness. He felt a stir in his blood. Inside him was a deep, unconscious imperative, urging him toward her. The remembrance of his vision—how she had called for him, the desperation in her eyes, took effect on him. Now that she was before him, flesh and blood, the desire to hold her was no less. Almost he was suffocated by the fearful emotion this feeling roused in him. Before he realized it, he was on his feet, standing over her.

“Do you not fear to be alone with me?” he asked, in the low, intense tones of intimacy. He had been, at first, afraid to dare to gaze upon, to scrutinize the depths of her strange eyes, but now he could not remove his attention from them. His presence, more than his proximity, caused in her perceptible discomposure. There was something powerful and threatening in him, which both frightened and attracted her.

For a long moment neither spoke. No sound broke the hush of the woods. The silence soon turned from intimacy to discomfort. Suddenly strangers again, he bowed his face. He spoke with bated breath, oddly contemptuous, “You are bold to leave the temple and commit yourself into the hands of a stranger.”

Again he took his place upon the fallen tree, taking up the book as if he would read, but the letters formed a single, unintelligible mass before his eyes. His concentration was destroyed.

Magenta paused briefly before she spoke. “I have other books of that nature, more advanced.” Deacon looked slowly up at her. “I could bring them to you—if you wish it?”

“Yes, I wish it,” he said, dropping again into an intimate tone. “Will you come tomorrow?” he asked. He wanted to see her, but mostly it suited his purpose if she would bring the unattainable books.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Then I shall be here, waiting.”

“It will not be before noon. I am first to see my father.”

“I don’t mind.”

“It is he, in fact, who shall lend what you wish,” she said, then added in a tone of secrecy, “Though it is best he not know about this generosity.”

Deacon at once took her meaning and gave a single nod in assent.

Chapter 27
The Exchange

Deaconwaited for Magenta where they had last spoken. With quiet intensity he sat deceptively calm, his head down-bent, hands clasped tightly in his lap. He rubbed one thumb persistently over the other. His face, taut and serious, almost feverish, bore an expression of heavily contained impatience. He felt restless and wasted. It was past noon and still he waited. Lifting his face with slow anger, he tried to breathe the air freely. He didn't want to feel any pain. He felt tight and bound within himself. Cruel thoughts of past evils tormented his tortured consciousness. Again Deacon lowered his face, dropping his chin, and drew a deliberate breath to regain some self-control. He closed his feverish eyelids and became quite still. The only sound, a gentle breeze, marked the passing minutes, and he sat listening to time. All his body was tense and hard. He was isolated in a dark shadow of resentment, and although he fought it, a single tear burned down his cheek.

At last, like a dream of night, Magenta came. He rose to greet her, relieved to see that she carried with her three books. "I could bring no more without causing concern," she said.

He reached out his hands. "It is good of you to bring them to me," he said, taking the books and looking over them as if anxious to determine their value. A smile broke across his dark face, but it was closed, as if his heart was full of bitterness.

She watched as he stood there, searching through the pages with deep attention. "How do you like Cheydon?" she asked at length.

"The sight of you is all the pleasure it has afforded," he answered, preoccupied. Finally he looked up. "Who is your father?" he asked, impressed if not cautious.

Magenta answered without boastfulness. “The one who administers rules regarding magic. And for those who breach the code of regulations, determines punishment.”

“Makes sense,” said Deacon, admiring the fine covers again. They were visibly superior to the ones he had previously studied. “I wasn’t aware priestesses had any kin beyond their own dark kind.”

A smile came her lips but did not reach her eyes. Deacon lowered his chin, feeling he had somehow offended her.

“It’s not common for those with family to serve. Seldom do I see my father, and of my mother I know nothing but the little he has told me. She passed into death before I had chance ever to know her.” Magenta’s pale countenance and saddened eyes told of an anguish far deeper than her speech portrayed. She returned his question after a moment. “What of your family?”

A slight frown crossed Deacon’s brow. Aimlessly, he rubbed his finger over his top lip, back and forth. “My mother left me not so long ago,” he muttered. His expression remained unchanged, but his lips compressed tightly as if to keep command of his emotions.

“Have you no other kin?” asked Magenta.

Deacon moved his hand and gave a short laugh. “I have three cousins, one of whom will not touch me because she fears me. The other two I cannot persuade to leave my side, even when I threaten them.” A smile crept to Magenta’s lips. She felt warmed by the affection she knew he felt for his family. “Also I have an aunt, their mother,” he continued. “She dotes on me until I go mad. And an uncle who—” He paused a moment as if he might not finish, then added, with an odd note of bitterness, “who reminds me too much of my mother.” He glanced at Magenta briefly, then looked away, and the conversation was ended. She asked no other questions, and he volunteered no other information. He took himself over to the fallen tree. “When am I to return these to you?” he asked, resuming his usual tone, holding up the books.

“I’m certain for a while yet he’ll not find them missing. But best, perhaps, if you keep them no longer than absolutely necessary.”

“I’ll not waste the time I have, then,” Deacon said.

“Would it bother you if I remained a while?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “It would not bother me.” He removed his cloak and laid it on the ground for her to sit upon. “Please,” he said when she hesitated. Grateful for the gesture, she did as asked.

Deacon remained over on the tree. She had turned her face from him so he would not feel the need to entertain her. Quietly she sat there, and to Deacon she was a book written in strange runes, indecipherable to him. Soon he returned to reading, vaguely, mechanically, looking at the page in a sort of stupor. He could not concentrate with her so near. Before too long, however, he was well-absorbed, but always half-aware of her.

Magenta’s mind was adrift with pleasant thoughts. She could feel the texture of his cloak beneath her fingertips. It looked as if it ought to be coarse and durable yet was exceedingly soft to the touch. When certain his attention was elsewhere occupied, Magenta brushed her slender hand across the material, allowing herself to feel every fiber, letting her fingers linger over the softness. She trembled almost as if it was the man she touched instead, glancing over to Deacon from under fine lashes. He was profoundly serious, his face down, his eyes concentrated. All his features were indicative of the keenest intellect and the fiercest passions.

Something very near to awe touched her whenever she looked upon him. His face was very beautiful to her. Without taking her eyes from him, she adored him feature by feature. She loved his black, straight, hair that fell so often into his blue eyes. She longed to kiss it, to run it through her fingers and hide her face in it. She loved his firm, proud lips and the manner in which he compressed them when deep in thought. His eyes particularly attracted her attention. The eyelids seemed always drooped with a kind of satiric contempt, but from underneath the heavy lids looked intensely observant eyes. How fine his face was. She could weep over him. Yet for all

that she knew not what truly drew her so inexplicably to the man. She looked at him for a long time, trying to distinguish the indistinguishable.

In spite of his apparent unconsciousness, Deacon was acutely aware of her every move, her every sigh. Soon she arose. He was sensible of the movement but did not alter the direction of his attention. When she had wandered a little way, his eyes lifted to watch her. She crouched down, trying to coax some little animal to come to her. They had evidently encroached on its territory. It hissed and spat, trying to assume a formidable look, which only seemed absurd.

“I would not hurt him, yet he fears me and will not come,” Magenta said to Deacon as he came and crouched down at her side. Stretching forth his hands, he urged the spitting fury to come to him, using all his consciousness to make it. When it did nothing more than grow wilder, Deacon reached forward and suddenly took hold of the soft, struggling thing. He spoke unknown words that Magenta thought most beautiful, and the rude critter grew civil at his touch. He held it gently with firm, confident hands. It was then she noticed how lovely his hands were. They were strong, young, and well-kept. The skin was sun-bronzed and lightly covered with fine, dark hair. He didn’t mind that she observed his hands. He wanted her to look at him.

The little animal was quite content, loving Deacon, and he handled it with the utmost care. Soon, when he was certain it was calm, he held the fluffy handful out for her to touch also. Gently she stroked it, letting the softness run through her fingers.

Deacon regarded her curiously and with gentle amusement. What could be more trivial, more insignificant, yet her face hardly seemed her own, so luminous and sweet—just like a flower that, once wilting, blooms to life after a warm spring rain. To see her thus amused thrilled him and gave a warm sense of content. He saw the gentleness of her nature. Discovering the truth of a person’s character is tremendously difficult, but any lingering doubts Deacon may have harboured about her had vanished. He could not believe for an instant treachery flowed through her veins. For a moment his face, as he looked on the young woman, was enkindled with tenderness, but

it fell quickly back into the dark, inscrutable sobriety that was characteristic of him.

“You are wonderful,” Magenta said to the animal, not the man, but when she lifted her eyes the words might well have been directed at him, so filled with love as they were. Deacon was quite absorbed with the bundle. With a bowed head and preoccupied manner, he did not know that Magenta had been watching him.

When he lifted his gaze again, he saw that she looked at him and was leaning forward to be near him. His eyes fell to where her slim white hand was close to his darker hand. He knew she would let him hold it, but he denied himself the pleasure of her touch. He would not risk his heart, or hers. Inside he felt too knotted and conflicted. He did not want the woman to get entangled with him.

“He is soft, isn’t he?” Magenta said. Her stroking had slowed to a languid caress. “Never have I known the life in these woods to be so fond. At the temple I linger in darkness, where life is meager.”

The soft bundle grew tired of their attentions, and with startling suddenness, bit the masculine hand that held it. With a sharp exclamation Deacon released it, and it scampered off out of view.

Magenta rose to her feet after Deacon. “Are you hurt?”

“Not very much,” he said. Her little look of distress amused and pleased him.

“How did you learn that?” she asked.

“Learn which?”

“To draw animals tame to your hand?”

A looked of satirical amusement crossed his face. “Evidently only tame as it pleases them,” he said, nursing his assaulted finger.

“What did you speak?” she asked, enthralled. “Were they elven words?”

“Yes, they were,” he said. An odd note came into his voice, as if he was regretful to have uttered them and betray that part of himself to her.

“You have dwelt with them?” she asked. There was a refinement about him not often seen in this world, an unusual gracefulness and dignity, which at once commanded respect.

“I have,” he answered.

“I’ve heard wonderful things about the elves. Is all that is said true?”

Deacon paused. He knew for her the elven world represented grace and beauty. “Their ways are not our ways,” is all he said, but his expression revealed a hidden suffering. She felt she scarcely understood him. She wanted to know him down to every last detail. He returned to his book, and she sat down again. Looking at him, she wondered what miracle of fate had brought him to her. In her heart she had cried out for him with all the anguish of her soul’s passion and yearning. Always her heart had called out to him. Now he had come.

Over the course of the next few days, Magenta spent many hours with him whom she thought the most interesting of companions. She spent every moment she could with him, often absenting herself from the temple for long hours without permission. She would generally find him seated on the fallen tree, book in hand, looking solemn and profound. In spite of the short time they had spent together, he had not grown ordinary to her, but instead became more and more absorbing.

Deacon came to depend on her presence. His need for her was every day implied but never uttered. The sweet stillness of her atmosphere was a comfort. She made the air about him seem richer, fuller, warmer. Never had he such a passionate love for the beauty of all things round him as he had when with her.

He by no measure received without giving, for new thought was open to her through him, new feeling awaked. Only in the night did she experience the full power of such feelings, when she wished more intensely that he was beside her. Unfortunately, sleep would not come to alleviate the pain of

such longing, and while the hours waned away, Magenta lay with thoughts of him. Not long was it before they had possessed her utterly, so that she could think of nothing but him, an irrepressible beating in her breast that kept her awake.

Chapter 28
Yearnings Of The Heart

No sound broke the sweet-scented hush. Deacon and Magenta had fallen easily into the habit of sitting with one another in the intimate seclusion of the woods. Neither feared the silence, and each found profound comfort in the other. He often sat near and read quietly, looking up from time to time. And often he found her eyes fixed on him.

For Magenta it was an overwhelming pleasure to be thus alone with him, capable of causing intoxication. Many women had been enthralled before her, but none had been so enveloped by his atmosphere as Magenta. There was a silent communion and gentleness between them.

Yet she did not know the man—he was as yet a presence and a stranger. An aloofness clung about him like a dark cloak. He was distant, self-contained, his temper reserved and serious. When he was deep in study an abstraction seemed to possess him. This dedication and patience in a man by nature impatient and passionate captivated her.

For long minutes she had been watching him. So insistent was her gaze that he soon felt it and looked over his book. A smile went over his face, very unexpected and with an unusual sweetness. She felt a surge of love, in response to the recognition and regard held in his gaze, as if a flame came alive within her, growing in intensity with each tender throb in her breast. He had a wonderful way of looking at her with those eyes, yet always they had this strange, black, half-tortured look.

When his gaze lifted again, Deacon saw that her attention had moved on to a flower that grew near the hem of her gown, a single flower struggling for its existence in such a place, a lonesome thing, morbid in its singleness. Magenta observed it with a strange and intent yearning.

“You find pleasure in flowers?” he asked.

“There are not many here to take pleasure in,” she said in her hushed way of speech. For a moment he observed her. “This particular type is unusual,” she said, brushing her fingers over the delicate petals. “If you plant them close to another of their kind, the colours will mingle and become one.”

Deacon watched her with a blank, heavy look. A protective restlessness was taking possession of him like an affliction and roused thoughts of the man he remembered pursuing her.

“Does that fellow bother you often?” he asked, looking at her in a heavy, inscrutable fashion. Magenta appeared a moment startled. “From the emporium,” he explained, though she already knew.

“There are moments,” she said. “He has long served my father.”

“And he visits you often?”

“Yes.”

“What does he mean by that?”

“He is quick to forget what he can and cannot have.”

“Are you going to let him keep at it?” he asked.

“I don’t let him.”

Anger came hard into Deacon’s face. “Am I to have it out with him?” he said, hastily and with hostility.

“No,” she said, and her face went pale.

“Why?”

“There would only be greater trouble.”

Deacon was very still a moment, displeased. He wondered if ever there had been an attachment between the two, or if the pursuit somehow

gratified her. He looked at her and tried to determine designs of mischief. His eyes were dark. He seemed waiting to be told, not quite daring to ask. Then: “What do you mean by it?” he asked, very low.

“There is no meaning. He does as he wills, and I make certain it does not touch me.”

Something about her mouth was unbearable to him. He wondered why she did not let him help her. He did not understand, but felt she must have her reasons. They went quiet and returned to their separate occupations, content to seek their own thoughts. Presently Deacon looked upward, his eyes searching. Above her was a tender vine with delicate white-flowers, twined about the trees, hanging gracefully. With a gesture so subtle she did not see, he slowly brought it down.

Magenta roused from her gentle musing as if suddenly awaked—something brushed her cheek, soft as a feather. She looked up and watched as the flowering vine moved down, evidently by another source than that of the wind. Pleasantly, sweetly, the creeping plant very slowly, very gently, twined about her waist and around her limbs. The tendrils brushed against her luxuriously and touched her lips, twining about her, caressing her.

A prisoner to the tangled vine, she glanced up from under fine lashes toward the source. He watched her distantly. A hint of a smile began to play about his sweet strong mouth. Though never far from her, Deacon had always seemed remote and removed, but this gesture of playful tenderness brought them together as if he himself had touched her.

After a moment she began to disentangle herself from the loosened tendrils, and Deacon came to crouch before her. Hesitantly he reached forward to assist in the removal with a faint gesture of his kindling affection, but she had already brushed the last vine from her. His withdrawing hand touched hers, and the moment of contact, slight as it was, aroused in both a certain remorseful yearning for resumed contact, yet the intensity of this emotion put discomfort between them, a jarring note of disunity, and so there was even less possibility of touch than before, unless modesty passed away and unity came in a torrent of undeniable passion.

This estrangement came more from him than her. She was very much in love with him.

He remained crouched down. One hand rested on his thigh, the other hung lifeless between his knees. She fondled in her hands one of the little white flowers that had broken off the vine. She was disappointed she could not find a way to wholly connect with him.

“Women and flowers,” said Deacon, watching her. “There’s an affinity between the two, isn’t there?” He smiled, uncomfortably.

Her own smile faded. Her gaze fastened on the small thing in her hand. “I know flowers to be our companions in time of passing—they devour old abandoned walls, and they have venom instead of blood. They make poisons and toxins, take our breath away …” As she spoke her palm was poised above the flower, all her focus concentrated on it, almost vindictively. She watched with a detached interest as it withered beneath her touch. As if a thousand years had passed, it lost its flush and freshness, it became dried and shrivelled, drained of its bloom, and eventually died.

Deacon watched with silent alarm. There was horror in witnessing beauty destroying beauty. He remained transfixed.

“They can be treacherous beauties,” Magenta murmured, as if pained, slowly looking up at him. For a time she was silent. Deacon saw that when her consciousness readjusted itself, she mourned the death of the little flower. Why she should lament over it, in a manner so keen, perplexed him. With her feelings of vindictiveness his own had come up within him like a languid poison.

“But I should not be so vengeful,” Magenta said softly. “She is beautiful —Nature. There are many abundances to be thankful for.”

With a scornful sound, Deacon turned his face aside, an eyebrow raised with a twitch. “Don’t speak to me about nature,” he said. He rose to his full height. “I have no love for her. I feel and see only death. Even your beauty wilts and perishes before my eyes with the decay of time.” He rubbed his hands over his face as if worn by some burden. “I feel it building in

momentum each passing day with sickening acceleration. It will not slow, and everything is lost within its great hunger. It makes all that is now a pleasure a bitter pain, knowing it is all to be lost in the end."

Magenta, who had longed for a glimpse into his soul, listened quietly and unobtrusively, passionate in her desire to understand him.

He became quiet, seething with resentment, and then slowly, with bitterness: "It seems we are condemned to have everything taken from us, piece by piece, till we have nothing left but to submit to death ourselves."

"Nature is cruel in her way," she agreed.

"Then why do you mourn that small thing?" he asked fiercely, glancing at the dead flower. He did not understand her. "Do you not hate nature?"

"I will see Nature in her entirety," said Magenta. "And not wholly condemn her for part-failings." Deacon did not remove himself from her physically, but there was a great distance between them, and in her soul she felt quite alone. "I feel the pressing of time, also," she said quietly. "My only comforts are the words I tell myself."

He looked cynically from under dark brows. "And what are the words you tell yourself?"

She hesitated beneath the intensity of his stare, then said with soft assurance, "That nothing is taken that cannot be found again. Always I remind myself of this."

The afternoon sun filtered through trees in golden effulgence. Deacon, suddenly feeling foolish for his outburst, rubbed the back of his neck as if it ached. "Come, I'll return you home, priestess."

She rose reluctantly. She disliked his cold use of the term—she would rather her name came from his lips.

Together they went through the silent wood. Her hands were clasped passively in front. His hung at his sides, clenching, at times, almost

convulsively. He wanted to draw her against him as they walked. If he could put his arm around her and hold her softness against him, the smoothness of her motion would have soothed him. Instead he was withheld by his suppressed anger.

“Where do you go when you come here alone?” he asked, in a strangely penetrating voice.

“Shall I take you there?” she answered, lifting her face toward him. They came to a standstill.

“Would you like to show me?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then show me.”

Magenta took Deacon to a place where a steep fall of water flowed from a height, cascading down smooth rock. They stood atop looking down.

“This is where you come?” he asked.

“Do you not feel the freedom of it?” She held her eyes shut and let the breeze take her. He made no answer but looked at her as if she fascinated him. She had a beautiful look of abandonment. He had an exhilarating sense of risk in standing so precariously near the edge. She took a deep breath and let the pale sunshine play across her features. She loved the breeze when gentle. She opened herself to it, and took its caress on her face and throat.

“I come here to allow myself a sense of release.” She turned her face toward him and found that his eyes were already upon her. His expression, uncloaked, revealed wonder and pure adoration. They stood there an uncounted number of minutes, neither speaking, lost in the wonder of the breeze. The afternoon light faded rapidly. Looking down, Deacon noticed how close she had come to the edge, and in sudden alarm, felt the urge to take hold of her arm and pull her back. He checked the impulse, however, and instead moved closer to the edge with her. She seemed to drift nearer and nearer.

“I fear my life has been a perpetual condition of waiting,” she said at length, assuming her former sobriety.

“What is it that you are waiting for?” he asked slowly, keeping a nervous watch on her footing.

“To be conscious of living,” she said wistfully. “I wish to feel as much as possible, with the highest degree of intensity possible.” As if unaware how near she was to the edge, she took a step closer, seemingly drawn by the allure of the wind. Instinctively he put out a hand to catch her should she lose her stability. “I fear what you fear,” she said, glancing at him. “I fear I shall be here, lost in darkness, till the years have withered by and there is nothing left for me but death.”

“Can you not leave any time you desire?” he asked, preoccupied, his eyes fixed at where she stood precariously.

“A task more easily said than achieved,” she answered.

He could feel his pulse beating in his throat as he watched. He felt afraid for her. She stood fearlessly. He very quietly sought her hand. “Come away now,” he half-pleaded, half-commanded, glancing downward. Once he had hold of her, he fastened his grip, as if afraid she would be lost to him should he let go. Her eyes fell to the hand that clasped hers, and her heart seemed to faint. His grasp was so strong, so assured. She allowed him to assist her back to a safe distance.

They drew to a standstill, his hand clinging still to hers, and it was as if all her soul was drawn to him. Facing one another they were very quiet, very calm. The scent of flowers was in the air of the falling evening. They were such strangers, yet he stood so very close, so very intimate. His head was bent down as if he had a yearning toward her, but a deep reservation held him apart. He looked down at her heavily. She watched him with a warm expectancy. She knew not what he was feeling or thinking, and she was afraid to speak and break the dream-like languor. She wanted his tenderness, his caresses. Waiting for him was pleasure that was almost pain. Under his gaze she became vaguely aware of everything round them, near

and intimate, as lovely presences upon her, contained by him, as if he was the medium through which she felt the beauty of all things.

They remained in this half-dream as the night imperceptibly gathered round. Her standing there like that, soft and passive, waiting for him, made his blood beat. He wanted to gather all her warmth and all her softness into him. She seemed offering herself to him, so vulnerable, possessing a gentleness and grace indefinably elegant, but which he knew came from sorrow, and he was drawn to her with a deep sympathetic tenderness.

He saw that she was submerged. She needed him. He was her breath. His heart was tight. He knew where his thoughts were going. She saw the ardor fade from his eyes. The tenderness, however, did not. His eyes remained dark and soft and communicative. Her heart was swelling with emotion and yearning. She wanted to know him, to gather in all of him by touch.

It was then he decided that he would comfort her with his heart. For the short time that he was to remain, she would have the assurance and sympathy of his love, though he knew he would have to steel himself against her when he withdrew it again. He brushed aside the strand of black hair that blew across her face with a soft, lingering touch, his gaze heavy and steady. She waited upon him breathlessly. She could feel him searching her tenderly with his eyes, making a silent effort to comfort her. Then he looked up, watching the light fade, as if in thought, and as if he were alone. She watched his averted face and felt vague and confused.

“Come with me,” he said and again looked down at her. “I want to show you something.” The stillness remained in his voice and the heavy tenderness in his eyes.

“Where are you going to take me?” she asked, allowing him to lead her by the hand.

“You’ll see soon enough.”

Together they passed through the trees, among the falling shadows. She was so beautiful passing in the darkness, he thought the night might draw

her back, so that no other should have her. When they at last reached the edge of the wood, night had fallen and settled over the lake. He left her to stand among the trees and bent down by the water. She waited for him to come back, but he remained crouched there.

“Come over here to me,” he said. She went to him and watched as he lay his open palm on the black water. At the first touch of his hand came the effect of frost on the surface, forming ice, and it spread rapidly a distance out on the lake. He arose and, with a certain alert sensitiveness, led her far out onto the surface transparent as glass. Underneath was a deep, seemingly endless black. She felt its great depth and was afraid, but continued on with the wonder of it, clinging the while to his firm hand. He drew her to a standstill and crouched down, urging her down with him. Again he placed his hand on the surface. All she saw was this deep mass of cold darkness, yet she shivered with anticipation at what he would reveal to her. This excitement arose as much from him being the one to share it with her as from the event itself.

“The water,” said Deacon, “is full of life.” A gentle glow put forth from his hand began gradually to illumine the dark beneath. For a moment everything below was still, a dead stillness. Then she could see, through the grainy darkness, life stirring. He was drawing it up. At first she seemed to feel it more than see it, like a great wave coming up in her stomach, so that she felt unbalanced, and might fall forward with the immense gravity of it.

It was coming up quickly, and she felt a flush and fainting in her breast, as if he and she might collide with whatever he was urging up. It approached, as it were, with a great swell, a kind of arrogance about its entrance as if it knew they watched intently for its spectacular rising. The immense beast’s great, sleek, grey mass skimmed and glided just beneath the surface, before diving deep again, returning to the depths, and there came a breath of relief as the rush ebbed away.

Magenta was flushed, her eyes alight with life. He smiled with a tender luxuriousness, a pride surging up in him. Presently he recovered, and smaller life gathered near the surface, languid and peaceful.

“Do you still feel there is meager life here?” he asked, glancing quickly up at her. For a moment his face was unguarded in its love and affection.

“You have altered my perception,” she said, softly.

There settled upon them a reverenced hush, together watching the stir of activity beneath. The beauty of it caused a mysterious want in her soul. He watched her with a kind of fascination. He leaned forward, coming as near as he could without lifting her attention to him and away from the spectacle beneath, where fish and other life moved with lively tranquillity.

“Look at them all,” she murmured. She was passive and marveling at the beauty she had perceived for the first time.

“It was kind of you to show me this,” she whispered, looking into his face. She came very near to expressing her adoration of him. He had the most beautiful, rarest of smiles, not frequent nor brilliant, but slowly stealing up, issuing a gentle flame, as deep as it was warm.

“We should return,” he said in a quiet, decided tone. He rose to depart, assisting her up with him.

“Will you find yourself in trouble, returning at such a late hour?” asked Deacon as they walked toward the cottages. “It must take several hours to cross that water. I should not have kept you so long.”

“There will be no trouble,” assured Magenta. “She’ll believe me to have been with my father.”

Pressing her hand, he left her to walk on her own to a dank dwelling by a little wooden dock. An old man lived there who owned a boat. He often took Magenta across the water to the isle when she was alone. Deacon continued on his own through the darkly clustered cottages toward Cade’s home. The memory of the evening was like a faded dream.

He reviewed the hours he had passed with Magenta with a smile visible on his lips, shaded by affliction. His heart was heavy with a tenderness that verged on grief. He could master his physical self, but his emotional self he

struggled with. The knowledge of impending separation was a burden upon him. He knew her heart would break. Deacon pinched his fingers into the corners of his eyes. His head ached, and he wished to sleep, but she occupied his dreams so frequently he no longer wished to close his eyes.

Chapter 29
Coming Apart

It was late morning, yet a chill prevailed as if winter shadows were perpetually cast. In the grove Deacon waited alone. She had not yet come to him. When finally she did, Magenta brought with her another book. He rose to greet her. “I have something else for you,” she said.

“I see,” he said, smiling. He seemed neither impressed or disinterested; nevertheless she was pleased by his attentiveness and the kindly manner in which he received her. They very soon settled down into their usual way of things. Magenta sat in quiet repose on the cloak laid down for her, Deacon on the fallen tree. He didn’t look at the new book but continued with divination. He must very soon give it back to her and wanted to extract as much as he could from it.

“Tell me of your journey here,” she asked at length.

Deacon looked up at her without speaking, as if deep in thought. It seemed he hadn’t heard, his mind not yet readjusted. “What did you ask of me?” he said.

“For you to tell me of your time coming here,” she said. “I have not ever seen outside the city.”

“I’ve seen less than I would like myself,” he admitted. “But we did cover a great deal of land to get here. I think the youngest will be cured of his wanderlust for good.” Deacon was a few years younger than Magenta yet had seen more of the world outside in mere days than she had her entire life. He told her of the things he had seen: little villages and rich lands with many farms, woods, and vineyards. He told her the land became distinctly harsher, more dismal, toward Cheydon, the people more intractable, as if the chill of a dark shadow had settled upon the lands.

“I don’t know if the shadow lingers because of the darkness here,” said Magenta, “or whether the darkness is drawn here because of the shadow.”

Deacon noticed she passed her fingertips lovingly over the fabric of his cloak. Her face was down and held a soft expression of sadness. He could not look upon her without feeling a stab of tenderness. He bit his lip, brooding over her. “When at first I saw you in these woods,” he began tentatively, “what affliction burdened you? I could scarcely recognize your face for grief.”

Her pale cheek and bloodless lip seemed to grow fainter at his words. “My home is a detestable place,” she said. “Every chamber encloses some awful thing. In silent places, in a deep darkness where there is no light, my kin commit terrible acts.” For a moment she was motionless, transfixed, staring at her hand. “There was a boy. I tried to save him, but he died. There is blood on their hands, and no one will prevent them from wetting them afresh. I am one of them. Their poison went deep into my body. Sometimes I feel so contaminated, I feel I am not born to this world.”

Magenta gazed at him with a face that to look upon was to love, full of that calm forbearance which rendered it intensely beautiful to him. He could not bear the look of appeal she directed at him. He sought the ground with his eyes. His first impression was that some cruel force bearing influence over her had deepened. Poison, treachery, evil flowed in her veins. Yet he knew it could not entwine with her spirit.

“A man came here once in service for the arch mage,” she said. “He went to the temple yet did nothing. He was blind to all that went on there, and when I spoke of it to him, my voice went unheard.”

“People are fools,” said Deacon. “They see and hear only what they want to, and if they don’t see it, it doesn’t exist.” He clenched his teeth. “And evil is cunning. It can take many years to discover it and many more to rectify it. Give it time and changes will be made for the better.”

He spoke with warmth and conviction, and Magenta felt certain he was destined for great things, a latent force which, like a spark, waits to burst forth in vivid flame. They continued to speak, and it gave her great comfort

to know that he understood and possessed similar feeling to her. Talking, he found her gaze intently on him, and she saw that for some reason he wished to avoid her eyes. They had become strangely pale in her passion, yet it was not this strangeness that filled him with a returning dread, but the kindling affection he knew she harboured for him. He again took up his book but was hesitant to leave her outside of his attention. She saw this and decided to relieve him of the predicament.

“I have occupied your thoughts too long,” she said with something of an apology and rose to her feet. She wandered a little distance, looking away from him into the trees. He returned to his study, relieved her attention had strayed from him. But he was mistaken.

A gentle breeze stirred her dark hair, and Deacon, seeing her from over the book, lost entirely the thread of his thought. He found himself watching her as she drifted, his entire concentration devoted to her. Her beauty and her haunting quality was becoming terrible to him. She seemed to weave a spell upon him, under which he could not long forget he was in a body that required the touch of a tender companion. Endlessly her heart called to him. Her entire being vibrated with an immense longing and travelled toward him wherever he was, drawing him to her. The anguish of her soul’s yearning and the radiating force of her love called to him. As if feeling the answer upon her, Magenta turned and looked at him, reflecting her lingering tenderness.

Deacon found falling in love with her as inevitable and inescapable as death. It filled him with a rising, suffocating dread. A character such as his was not easily touched, but once roused, he felt with immeasurable intensity. It was not what he wanted.

One morning Magenta, fearing she was to become a burden to him, asked softly, “Do you tire of my presence?”

“No,” he said, in his dispassionate way. “I find it a comfort.” As he spoke his hand worked at the clasp at his throat. He unfastened his cloak and laid it down for her. He never forgot seeing her as she stood there waiting, watching him, her eyes full of love. Her countenance was calm,

free from all perplexity and trouble. Without the cloak his throat was bare above the neck-band of his black shirt, strong and smooth.

“Why do you not sit with me?” she asked.

Deacon hesitated a moment, then took a place beside her, his face pale. He didn’t want this to happen. He rubbed his thigh restlessly, then lifted the book in an attempt to read. He would not look at her. He felt, sitting next to her on the cloak, that there was something too fatal in the situation, something too intimate. Her scent, like faded perfume, roused his senses. It was tormenting to be with only the trees and her.

He could easily have reached across the little space dividing them and touched her. He knew she had thought of it almost as often as he had. Against this he struggled but kept his eyes fixed down. Her presence obstructed his concentration. She watched him persistently.

“Are you so inquisitive about my thoughts?” he asked, without looking up. He lifted one of the books. “Read this and you’ll find where they are.”

“I have read it,” she said. “Yet I cannot move things with my mind as you can.”

She looked at him so reverently that he wondered if her heart was not merely bound to an idea of him. He wondered, also, if perhaps her success in winning his heart would not prove to be her punishment, upon discovering the reality of his evil nature. But then he had so often found her eyes directed at him in such a manner as to suggest she could, in fact, see into his very soul. Perhaps darkness perceives darkness as light.

He turned to look into her eyes. “Answer me truthfully,” he said slowly. “Why do you wish my company?”

She could not answer with words but instead reached for him. His eyes, which were so perfectly clear and set on her, fell to where her fingertips lightly touched the back of his hand, asking for him mutely. Something stirred uneasily in him. His lips parted slightly when he felt from her touch a strange influence. His eyes lifted heavily to hers with wordless

comprehension. He was fascinated, scarcely able to move, fearful of the unknown ecstasy she concentrated through him, filling into his veins, as if she were some infinitely warm, sweet suffusion.

“You’re affecting me,” he murmured, hardly able to keep his voice steady. “I can feel it.”

She saw enough in his face to impel her to move nearer upon him. Her hands went over him tremulously, gently, with discovering fingers. He felt an appeal coming from her that made him breathless. He watched her eyes, heavily, steadily gazing into his and could feel he was losing himself to her. His heart filled with a hot pain and yearning.

She let her fingers wander over his face like a person with no sight, taking in every detail with exquisite unreservedness. His cheeks and chin perfectly smooth. As she did this, his gaze wandered over her face with a strange blankness. He was gone in a kind of wonder yet concentrated, keenly aware of the nearness of her body, laid against him with gentle pressure. He could feel his heart beating in his throat. She touched his cheek and chin and lips. Her fingers lingered over his mouth. Never before had she touched the lips of a man.

He softened beneath her touch, yielding momentarily to sweetness, burning almost beyond self-control. He could not find the strength to break with her, suffering from the sight of her slightly parted lips, yet a part of him was held away. He wished to subject himself to her utterly, yet he would be free of her. She became overwhelming in her gravity. She was drawing him out when he wanted to be withdrawn, alone in his darkness. A bitterness came up in him that she did not yet feel. Her soul arrested in wonder and awe, she approached her lips to his. He placed his hands on her waist, but instead of drawing her closer, strained his face away.

“Are your lips venomous also, priestess?” he asked bitterly, and slowly too, as if wanting her to feel the full sting of his words.

“No more so than your tongue,” she said in a voice cold with hurt. He seemed bent on wounding her. She broke from him and rose sharply to her

feet. He was on his feet also and seizing her by the arm, wheeled her round to face him.

“What am I to be charged with,” he asked. “Being reckless with your heart?”

Silence was the hurting maiden’s only answer. Her breath came quick and short. She remained passive in his grasp but intensely withheld. Her eyes were indicative of deep hurt, her face pale as one dying. In his chest Deacon felt a pain deeper than death.

“Have ever words of love passed my lips?” he asked brutally.

It was a moment before she answered. “Sometimes a man’s eyes speak as well as his lips.”

He could have, of course, denied it. But he knew she had too true an estimate of his feelings. Presently he released her, and to his dismay, saw the red marks his fingers had impressed on her pale flesh. An apology rose and died on his lips. A helpless silence fell between them. As she made a move to leave, he caught hold of her again. “Wait.” He stooped down and collected the books, holding them to her. “You might as well take these with you.”

“When you’re finished,” she said weakly, making no move to accept them.

“I’m finished,” he said, putting them into her hands. He would like to have gone through them again and again, but he had taken mostly all he needed, an achievement that was only possible through his bitter determination. He had a great capacity for retaining knowledge, a quickness in learning.

Magenta left the grove more subdued than she had entered it. Deacon watched after her, and when she had vanished, turned his back, hitting his hand against the tree. He let his head hang. For some time he stood torn and miserable, left in silence.

Chapter 30
Hope Dies Hard

The night was like death. Deacon crawled into his bed and lay on his back. His limbs felt weak and nerveless. He tried to feel relief and freedom. No longer would she burden him. But he failed in finding comfort in his resolution. A dull ache in his chest persisted. Closing his eyes, he willed himself to sleep, without success. Frustrated with the struggle, he laid his forearm across his eyes and tried to banish all feelings, only to have them return to him more forcefully than before. He thought, with bitterness, how devoted she had been, how willing to comfort and submit to him. He tried to forget her bloodless face when he so brutally withdrew from her. The thought of her crying alone in the night cut into him. All the night he lay in wretched wakefulness, haunted by the recollection of her face.

The days were bitter for Deacon. He did not return to the grove but instead wasted miserable hours at the library, sitting in a quiet corner, isolated within himself. He found he could not study. Each time he tried to commit himself his mind would go back to her and left him powerless. Hot tears would come from his eyes, but he would swallow them like a bitter poison. He hardened himself with all his might.

Deacon took up his old book but laid it down again. His mind and body were not his own, and he loathed his lack of self-command. He ran his fingers through his hair and down over his face. He was provoked by how poorly he endured her absence. Worn with the struggle, he returned to the woods in the poor hope of a chance at seeing her. Five times in three days he had gone there without finding her. He waited for hours without weariness, tormented by her absence from him. He had suffered so bitterly when she did not come that when he returned home the sight of him tore at Cedrik’s sympathetic nature. He saw Deacon’s bowed head, his pale, expressionless face and knew something was gnawing at his heart. Her shadow was upon him.

Deacon fell semi-conscious into his bed. His mind burned with the recalled presence of the woman. He shuddered at how very near he had come to giving her everything of himself. She had ruined him. She was the only being who existed for him on the earth. She was ever-present. Her beauty pervaded his heart little by little and remained there like the point of an arrow. Thoughts of her came undesired upon him, unmerciful in their torment, like a sickness. He felt he was in her power. He was gnawed with restless desire, a violent craving for reconciliation, which he fought against. At times a sensation as though he could not breathe attacked him. The scent of flowers seared him. He began to grope restlessly for self-command. He wanted to cry, to smash things about him in a fury. He hid his face in the softness of the pillow. Against her he persisted in steeling himself, but her voice ever whispered in his head.

Weariness finally stole over him, and he fell into a tortured repose. Even in his sleep he was not free from her. He could feel her in his dreams, tempted by visions that were almost a physical pain to him. They burned in his blood, and his blood ran hot for her. When Deacon opened his eyes, he did not move. He could not rouse himself from the bed. He was done. The effort of will was gone.

There came into his consciousness a faint sensation. He woke a little. Something was urging him in his brain. He would exert his will, and he would be gone from here, away from her. His aching heart again was crushed in a hot grip of hatred. With fearsome resolve he decided to make another attempt to find the man who consumed his heart and made it bitter. He would go to his father, and there his pain would end.

Recovering himself, Deacon went out of the house and down by the lake. He stared with fixed intensity across the water toward the isle, transfixed, as if he could will her to come to him. He must see her. It possessed him utterly. He suddenly started down toward the wooden dock that he had so often seen Magenta go to.

The temple was cold and forbidding. Deacon approached with a sense of unease. Already he could feel its oppressiveness. At the entry were two great flames, burning like beacons for the damned and an immense statue of a maiden, both terrible and beautiful. Her imposing expression gave the

impression of eternal watchfulness and of denying all the world entrance. He looked at it scornfully.

The moment he entered, Deacon was struck by its extravagance and haunting architectural beauty. He saw beauty of the highest degree, the architecture sparing no detail, yet it had an atmosphere of emptiness, a feeling of self-denial and repression. The terrible loneliness of the place was inescapable, the air heavily perfumed with a cloying sweetness that oppressed him.

He continued on, observing the evil-smelling hall and vaguely aware of the bent forms of the worshippers. He soon caught sight of a girl, a sharp, neat little thing, who appeared to be a serving-maiden, for she went about perfuming the place with incense. She was not a priestess but was dressed in a rich gown the colour of blood-red wine. Deacon approached her with purpose. “Can you help me?” His voice was handsome, resonant, and level.

The girl glanced at the grim, dark-haired young man disdainfully, then continued to laden the air.

“I’m here to see one of your priestesses,” he said, undaunted. “Magenta is her name. Will you retrieve her for me?” He was exceedingly uncomfortable in his surroundings. He grew impatient when she failed to take action for his request. “Are you going to find her for me, or am I to go up there myself?”

The imperious girl stopped and looked at him. “Wait here and I shall return,” she said, as if it were a trouble and a bore. She glanced back at him. “What name shall I give?”

“She’ll know who I am,” he said. Gathering the folds of her dress she disappeared up the stairs. He blinked with heavy lids, half-smothered. The air was almost too scented to breathe. While he stood, suffering, he looked about with distaste. He thought of Magenta being here her whole life. The bleakness of such an existence would be enough to oppress most natures.

Passing by him were several priestesses. The effect of their coming was immediate. The air became darker, heavier. An unease which was almost

superstitious came to him, at the sight of their long, dark forms. All had the same smooth black hair, as if made that way by their pernicious, evil practices. He observed how unlike they were to Magenta. It seemed they moved with no sight or thought of their surroundings, as if they lacked a will and consciousness of their own. Their eyes, dispirited and cast down, were filled with the blackness of death, yet when turned upon one, those haunting gazes could penetrate like a knife. He knew not whether to pity them or despise them.

For a long time he waited with the outward appearance of calm, but inward anxiety. The more he observed her surroundings and the controlling influences of her life, the deeper became his impression that she was a prisoner in this bleak and unhappy place.

In a moment the serving-maiden returned and Deacon came forward impatiently, “Is she here?”

“Yes.”

“And does she know that I am here?”

“Yes.” The girl’s manner was cold.

“Well, may I go to her, then?”

“I do apologize, but she’ll not see you.”

“Will not see me?” he said, without believing it, yet angered by the mere thought of it.

“No.”

“What has she said?” he asked, growing excited. “Tell her I am here and that I must see her, if only for a moment. Tell her, go!” He leaned nearer, with hostility, and said very carefully, “It is best you don’t refuse me.”

There broke in a commanding voice. “Do not forget, young man, that this is my home!” The sharpness caused both Deacon and the girl to look up suddenly. Coming down the grand staircase, in all her regality, was the high

priestess. She had a terrible quality, something contaminated and venomous, her poisonous beliefs absorbed into the very pores of her being.

Her long, slender form was adorned with a striking gown, befit for some unholy deity. Her hands were bound with black scarves, so only the fingertips could be seen. Had her hands been uncovered and displayed, they would have revealed an unpleasant sight: the flesh rotting from many atrocious acts. A greater portion of her body would have suffered this misfortune had not the priestesses possessed a degree of regenerative qualities.

“You must forgive my intrusion,” said Deacon. “It is important I see one of your priestesses. There has been a grave misunderstanding. If you would give me but a single moment, I’ll trouble you no further.” He spoke in low, even tones and kept himself composed. However, there were signs of desperation that he was not able to conceal. He was about to press the issue, when she raised a finger to him, indicating he should be silent.

“She has been sent for?” came her question to the serving-maiden. The girl, rendered timid by his previous forcefulness, cast a nervous glance at him before nodding. “And she refuses?”

The girl nodded again.

The high priestess turned her full attention to Deacon and said, with feigned disappointment, “It seems she is in no condition for company. Another day, perhaps.” She circled round behind him. “Though I must tell you,” she said, resuming her antagonistic speech, “we are a religious order, bound by vows and devoted to prayer and contemplation. You’ll find each priestess is sincerely committed to her course and would have little time for you.”

He pressed his lips tightly, as if striving for composure. Inside he was burning, yet he managed to command his temper so far as to receive her words in complete silence.

“Only those women of few wants, who devote their time to reflection and worship, without distraction, can possess a divine consciousness and

secure for themselves happiness in this life and the life to come." She stopped before him. "Do we understand one another?"

The look she gave him enraged Deacon. He felt now she was purposefully withholding Magenta from him. "Where is she?" He moved hastily toward the stairs, but the high priestess barred his way.

"Let me warn you!" she said, scarcely restraining her temper, "This is a sacred temple. You have no right to pass into any of its apartments. Attempt to proceed one step further in this direction, and it shall be at a great cost to yourself."

The forcefulness of her bearing took him aback. He knew there was little he could do to force entry, and there was no reasoning with her. He turned to leave when he felt her lay a hand familiarly on his arm. She was about to speak, but instead a curious expression crossed her features. It seemed, almost, he had given her a shock upon contact, for she flinched with a sharp intake of breath, closing her eyes. He stared at her, confused as to what had passed between them.

He had given her no shock, but for the surprise of knowledge. She was able to enter his bloodstream and mingle her contagions with his blood. Because of this ability, she could detect that his life force and magical energies were interwoven, that he was Riven and that he might prove useful. Quickly she regained her self-possession and said in a tone more cordial, "Return tomorrow, and I shall insist she sees you."

The high priestess gave a smile that was more ghastly than her previous look of fixed vexation. Deacon's features underwent no change, but he regarded her with suspicion. He could feel her touch contaminating him. Impatiently he shook her off.

In her personal quarters Magenta was oblivious to the nearness of him. No word of his presence had made it to her ear. The high priestess, having become aware of her long absences, now kept stricter watch upon her. Magenta had not forsaken him. Deacon had left her with a bloodless wound, but her love lay deeper and would have borne a great many more sorrows before ever turning from him.

Deacon left the hall in a silent rage. As he vanished round the corner, Magenta had happened to come down the stairs. She managed to glimpse the back of him before he disappeared from view. At the sight of him, brief as it was, her heart beat fast. Gathering her gown, she hastened her step, but upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, her arm was caught in a fearful grip and she was pulled roughly the rest of the way down.

“You will insist on betraying me,” the high priestess said. “Fortunately, this time it will prove to my advantage. You will account clearly how intimate your acquaintance is with this man. Tell me all you know of him, to every last detail of his character.”

In the plainest of speech Magenta told briefly of his kindness and his good nature but mentioned none of his abilities, insisting she knew nothing more. The high priestess knew Magenta was lying, believing that a young man could not help but reveal his talents to the young woman of his choice. For the time being she would let it pass. She wanted time to reflect on her discovery.

The moment she reached the seclusion of her chamber, Magenta leaned against the door for support. She felt out of breath. He could not come to her, and she could not go to him. She began to cry in a convulsive, soundless fashion.

In a state of apathy Magenta spent her days. Finding the impossibility of returning to him, she hoped he would find a way to come to her. When all else seemed to fail around her, surrounded by falsities and uncertainties, one thing she believed in was the love she held for him. It was real, complete, eternal. But she could not yet believe in his. Weary hours waned away and Deacon did not come. She was beginning to believe he didn’t exist. She went to her chamber window, listlessly, marked where the stab of his words fell. He had hurt her deeply, yet her patient and hopeful heart clung still to the love that had seemed to drift away, leaving her alone amid her cold suffering.

It was a grey, oppressive afternoon. Down by the cottages Deacon stooped over the black water. His heart beat quickly and strongly. This form of magic was unfamiliar to him, and he was forced to verbalize to achieve

his objective. He intoned the strange words, hoping he pronounced them correctly, and looking down into the still water, waited intently. At first there seemed no remarkable happenings, then, very slowly, he began to see vague forms in the water. They took shape of their own accord, and he could see plainly now that they were of old structures, darkly clustered together as a village.

“Terium, ouch. That’s a long way away,” said Cade. Deacon rose to his feet, agitated by the intrusion. Harsh words were on his lips, then he meditated a moment. “Your boys are in the market,” said Cade. “In case you’re wondering.”

“How is it you know that was Terium?”

“I recognize it. I’ve been there twice. I have a cousin there, you know.”

“Of course you do.”

“You thinking about going there?”

“Thinking about it,” said Deacon. He left Cade and made his way down the length of the lake.

“Why? What’s in Terium?” Cade called after him. “Other than my cousin! Hey, if you see him, tell him I said he still owes me three silvers!”

Deacon crouched over the water again. This time he had a clearer idea of what he wanted. Growing very still, he repeated the process. The images he saw caused him to pale visibly. It was many years since he had looked upon that face, and it was much changed, yet he knew him at once. He felt it was him. Deacon had seen him in his mind almost every day, haunting him as a ghost that would not die.

Deacon gripped the rock upon which his hand rested as if he might shatter it, like one crazed with trembling agony. For long minutes after the vision had vanished from his sight, he sat benumbed in his soul. After a moment he rose from his trembling and despondency. His breathing quickened as if he might give way to more violent emotion. Back toward

the house he began to walk in a tense, absent-minded manner. There he found himself alone, the old woman asleep upstairs.

Deacon paced the room. At times he seemed agitated and anxious, then he would fall into a dangerous calm, all the while his blood running hot. He could still see clearly in his mind the image of his father. It pierced him like an agony and made him clench his hands tight in order to subdue the pain. He wanted to bring the walls down around him in a fury. He didn't know what to do with himself.

The heated thoughts of his father tore at him, along with the painful thoughts of Magenta. He had a restless desire to see her before leaving, and she was withheld from him. He quite unexpectedly seized a vase from the table and hurled it across the room, shattering it on the wall. He gazed at it a moment, breathing heavily. The flowers looked lovely still, even among the broken pieces of pottery. He crouched down and begun to pick them up, carefully removing them from the broken shards so as not to lacerate the tender stems. He looked up and saw Cedrik standing at the doorway with a look of concern heavy over his features. Deacon carelessly let the flowers drop from his grasp.

"I'll replace that for her," he said, with barely breath to utter the words. Derek came in shortly after, clutching to his chest a bag loaded with bread and other baked goods. Deacon's appearance was enough to make him pale and stop in the doorway. Coming up from behind, Cade pushed his way past. His gaze fell on the shattered pottery.

"My Grandmother's vase," he said, horrified, through a mouthful of sweet-cake. "Anything else you feel like breaking?"

Deacon passed a tremulous hand over his dazed brow, lost for an apology.

Cade let out a sigh. "Not to worry," he said, pushing the broken pieces with his boot. "She never really liked it anyway. I'll get something to clean it up." He made no move, however, and showed great uneasiness. His glance passed back and forth between Cedrik and Deacon. "I'll take my time," he said with little subtlety, and going out, took Derek with him. "Let

your parents argue alone," he said as he passed, clutching the front of the younger man's shirt and urging him outside.

The two left standing there remained motionless. Soon Cedrik came in from the doorway, assuming a more casual air. "Your mother loved roses, I remember," he said, motioning to the flowers, though no roses were in the arrangement. Deacon said nothing but watched him from under dark brows, as if Cedrik were a stranger in whom he had no trust. He knew Cedrik was leading somewhere with the conversation.

Cedrik was a good man, with a less complex heart. When he went to his bed at night his conscience was light on his mind, but of late his mind and heart were heavy. He missed his cousin. He needed him back. "I think of her sometimes," he said. "She was a good sister to my father—"

"Cedrik, what are you doing?" Deacon asked, annoyed. "Leave it be."

"A fear has been growing upon me! Ever since your mother passed."

"Mind what you say," said Deacon and shuddered violently.

"You will not let me speak of her to you!" Cedrik's voice rose in despair. "You hide away in this grief. You keep it gathered to yourself as if it was yours alone. As for your father, I don't dare to speak of him," he said, as though it was a lesson well-learned. Deacon looked up, his black eyes flaring a caution. "It seems there are many things you no longer wish to speak to me about."

Deacon's eyes sought the ground. He folded his arms and compressing his mouth, made great efforts. He seemed to be suffering such a bitter grief it tore at Cedrik's heart to see. A long silence ensued before either felt inclined to speak.

"I'm concerned," said Cedrik. "Are you ill?"

There was no answer, save a shake of the head.

“What’s the matter with you, then? Where have you been all these days?”

Still no answer.

“Have you been off with that woman?”

“I wasn’t aware I was in the habit of discussing such things with you,” Deacon said slowly as he looked up into his eyes. Cedrik became exasperated.

“I don’t wish you to share with me every thought to pass through your head, but I need you to tell me what it is you suffer. And I want to know what aim your will is bent on. I know you well enough to perceive you have your sights set on something. Why did you come here? Answer me truthfully. I’ve held back from you long enough.”

“I have told you once why I’ve come,” said Deacon. “I’ll not repeat it.” Cedrik looked at him with a gaze that challenged and doubted.

Deacon brushed past him on the way out. “We leave tomorrow,” he said with a brutality bred of frayed nerves rather than anger.

After dinner, Cade lit a fire in the hearth and Cedrik, Derek, and the old woman settled down in the sitting room, each with hot spiced tea.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” said Cedrik.

Derek groaned, sinking down into the couch. He tried not to think of the long journey ahead of them. The mere thought of getting back on a horse hurt his spine. Cade looked surprised, if not a little disappointed. “Early?”

“No. I’ll go into town and buy provisions first.”

“We should buy something to take back as a gift for mother and Brielle,” Derek suggested.

Cedrik nodded and sipped the hot drink, then said to Cade’s grandmother, “I should like to give you compensation. You’ve been very

good to us."

"Nonsense," said the old woman, affectionately. She had taken a real fancy to Cedrik and his tight-laced way and perfect manners. "You can fix that step for me in the basement, and we'll call it even. I've damn near broken my neck on it three times. This useless thing," she motioned to Cade, "has been promising for months."

Deacon came down the stairs and in passing, announced to no one in particular that he was going out for a time.

"I shall go with you," offered Derek, starting up from the couch. His brother caught the back of his shirt and pulled him back down. Deacon passed out of the room without so much as a glance.

"You might convince that villain to stay in one of these nights," said the old woman. "Tonight is going to be cold. And you can tell him to take back that poor excuse for a vase." She pointed over to the pretty thing sitting as a replacement. It was expensive and characterless, she thought.

"What are you complaining for?" asked Cade. "That one's better than the old cobweb collector."

"That was my favourite," she said. "Your father bought me it when he was not much older than yourself."

"I am sorry." Cedrik apologized again.

The old woman waved it off and sipped her tea. "Don't worry your pretty head about it. It's evident you have enough to worry about with that black devil."

"I caught him scrying down by the lake today," said Cade. "As if that water isn't black enough."

"What was he scrying for, do you know?" asked Cedrik, sitting up with interest.

“Place called Terium, I believe. Except he didn’t know it was Terium; I had to tell him that. Whatever he was looking for wasn’t the city itself.”

In the cool evening air, Deacon stood by the water’s edge. He stood absolutely motionless, transfixed, staring out toward the isle. He held his cloak tightly round his body. As the night closed in, he watched the death of day, heavy with a sense of impending separation. He had a pallor about his mouth as if he suffered some consumptive illness. The thought of leaving her behind bled silently like a hidden wound. The night grew very dark about him. She could not come to him. He knew this, in agony. At last he decided he must go to her. She would be bound within that terrible darkness, but he could get to her. It would be his last indulgence. He would subdue his passion to see her one last time, then be free to part ways with her. A man never lies more convincingly to himself then when he has persuaded his conscience it is the last weakness in which he means to indulge.

He went to the dank cottage down by the little wooden pier and knocked. A thin, care-worn man came to the door, holding a lamp in his old, brittle hand. “I need you to take me across the water,” said Deacon, tossing him a pouch of coins.

The air was cool and heavily perfumed. Quietly and with purpose Deacon approached the temple. His heart pounded so loudly he feared he would wake the dead. He did not go to the entrance but passed round the side, through tangled plants, looking for means of ingress, but which room she was in, he didn’t know.

Magenta stood by the long window of her room, gazing vacantly down upon the black mass of garden. It was too dark for her to make out any of the details below. A tall figure stood among the shadows. She passed her eyes over him several times without seeing.

Her listless attitude was of gentle, patient sadness, her face paled by much waiting and suffering. She knew not when she would see him, but with her strength of heart she would endure however many hours, weeks, or years, for him to come. He alone would ever be in her heart. Turning, she went back inside, unaware of his proximity.

Deacon stripped off his cloak. He found placing for his boot tip on the side of the wall and looked up. He let out a resolute breath and began his ascent. It was difficult to get past the pernicious plants that consumed the side of the structure. They seemed to cling to him with claws, hurting. A number of times he nearly lost his footing and fell, the thorns cutting his hand. He swore beneath his breath, wondering if it was not mad what he attempted.

When he reached her window, Deacon saw that she stood alone. She seemed so wan, yet so lovely. The soreness of trials had made her youthful light less brilliant but more pure, like the tender light of night. He touched his fingers to the cool glass, asking mutely for her to turn and see him.

Magenta clutched her arms about herself, a dull ache in her breast. Soon there crept upon her a sensation of one drawing near from behind. She turned, hesitantly, and saw him whose image she had seen each night when her eyes were closing. Her heart grew faint. She felt she could weep with the heavy relief of his coming.

He stood waiting, his countenance entreating her to allow him admittance. She crossed immediately to him and pulled open the two great windows. With subdued thankfulness he entered, softly brushing by her. He looked weary and worn, never more serious and never more handsome. For a moment he didn’t speak, looking about the room with interest. It did not exude the vibrance one would expect from a young woman’s bedchamber but was cold and empty as a forsaken heart. Even in the subdued light he could see that it held no pretensions to beauty.

She hung back from him, watching him. She marvelled how it had been possible for him to climb so far. Soon his gaze settled upon her heavily. He went to her and took both her hands in his. She looked down and saw that his were cut and scratched.

“I will get you something,” she said. “It will sting at first but will stop the pain.”

She drew away, but he caught her back. “No, I don’t want it,” he said. He would rather the pain in his hands than in his heart. In a manner

somewhat restrained, nevertheless with the familiarity of a lover, he passed his wounded hand down her face. “Have I broken faith with you?” he said in a very different tone to which he had ever spoken before.

“No,” she said, with scarcely breath to utter it. Nothing broke the silent absorption they had in one another. He stooped nearer to her. She watched his eyes; they were full with a peculiar dark blaze, almost sad. There was a moment of breathless intensity. She let her eyes close as he lowered his face to hers and kissed her mouth with warm, trembling lips. Her heart contracted with pain for love of him. His kisses were soft, tender, prolonged in their stillness. His arm stole quietly round her, and it seemed all her soul was gathered into the dissolving flow of his kiss. All he could breathe was this moment. He let himself go to her. The blood mounted slowly, making his heart ache with burning but suppressed passion. In his arms she was all soft and warm and clinging.

She shuddered slightly after his kiss. He hid his face in her hair, holding her clasped. His throat was tight and ached, the bitterness of farewell upon him. She was calm and at peace against him, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of his body. His scent was warm and deeply comforting, like the vague smokiness issued from smouldering wood from a distance. She felt him clasp her more tightly in his arms, with the tenseness of a man dreading to be sent away. His heart was crushed in a hot, painful grip. He knew he shouldn’t have come to her.

Magenta noticed for the first time that he trembled. A melancholy and a fear began to touch her heart. She tried to cling to him. He felt like mist perpetually dissolving. He gave her a hopeless, desolate feeling, yet she was clasped firmly against him. She began to feel the distance in his body. “I should go,” he murmured. His face still hid against her.

“Will you come to me again before long?” she asked, still in his arms. A grimace flickered across his face, and he pressed his lips together. For a moment he could not speak to answer. He wanted to tell her he was leaving, not to return, but his heart failed him when he came to it. Finally he uttered something that bound him to nothing and said no more. Slowly, she drew back so she could look into his face. Tender words were on his lips, but he

hesitated. Her very breath seemed to pause and wait on his words, longing for him to say something meaningful.

“I don’t wish to go,” he said truthfully, stroking her hair with a soft, lingering gesture. And all her fears were dispersed. His eyes, his touch, told of more love than could be put into words. He drew a deep sigh. He had to rouse himself from the sleepy warmth to break from her. He would have liked to hold her all the night. “Are we at ease with one another?” he asked with a new energy, clutching her gently.

“Yes,” she said in the earnest fullness of her love. He gave a satisfied nod, took her hand, and pressed it fiercely to his lips. Only a thin thread held him back from bursting forth and giving all himself to her. With a haste born from nerves rather than passion, he kissed her a last time. At the window he took his leave with a lingering look. He wanted to impress her image in his mind so that he may carry it away with him.

Then, without any hesitation, he stepped and dropped down a distance that would have broken another man’s legs. Her breath caught in her throat, and she crossed quickly to the window to catch a glimpse of him. A wind caught her hair as she bent over.

The moon coming out from thick clouds afforded her just enough light to see him passing through the garden. She held her breath and, it seemed, kept her heart from beating, waiting for him to turn back to steal another glance. She remained at the window, cherishing the hope he enkindled within her. She watched him passing away from her, till her vision could follow him no longer.

Already her heart ached for him, but though this pain was acute, it was half pleasure; to have someone to languish for was sweet suffering. She would suffer for him. She had not seen the look of regret on his face as he turned and stole silently away.

Sobering in the night air, Deacon dragged in long restorative breaths. His heart had been torn and had bled. He returned to the cottage feeling fulfilled, destroyed, determined to put it all aside, turning from all thoughts of her.

Chapter 31
Proposition

The high priestess had requested a particular object from Orsious she believed would heal her hands. Unfortunately he was at a loss as to how to retrieve this precious item for her. Its place of keep was comparatively easy to penetrate, but those who kept it would be a difficult aspect of the task. These shadowy, immortal beings had been the first to study magic. Long ago they had been consumed by their power and now they had only their hunger for it, remaining hidden in the shadows, possessing no humanity. Their effects on the human form were limited. They could not kill a man but would rapidly deplete his power source and render him useless for the task.

Fortunately the high priestess had made a recent discovery. She had come upon a Riven. This unity of life source and power source is a potent combination. From his body is a greater pool to draw from, therefore, his strength holds up against any form of drain far longer, giving him more time to achieve his objective—but at a greater cost to himself.

“An encounter with a Shadow would kill him,” said Orsious, sitting back in the arm-chair, looking to the high priestess who stood opposite. Her expression, though severe, betrayed none of her thoughts. “He knows this. He’ll not be persuaded. I scarcely believe such an idiot exists who would.”

“There is a way,” began the high priestess, “though not always reliably effective, to break a dark ones hold.”

“I doubt he’ll be willing to risk his life on a chance—”

“It’s effective enough,” she said, vexed. “We can convince him of this and offer a reward for his efforts, and should that fail there are other ways to persuade a person to risk his life.”

A serving-maiden entered with a large tray held in her extended arms. She set down the spread and left again without a word. Orsious remained seated. He rubbed the rough grey-bristles on his chin. The high priestess began to pour the hot tea from a silver pot. He watched her as she did this. Her slender form held much strength and grace. She was a cruel creature, her every movement smooth and unnatural. He let his eyes drift up and down her. Even he felt the effects of her beauty, yet there was that in her from which every natural instinct revolts.

“Even if he should have adequate stores for the required duration,” Orsious began, doubtfully, “he still requires the skill to break down the obstruction.”

“Theron can show him, can he not?” she asked from over her shoulder without concern.

“It is certain he could, but there are other considerations to take into—”

She silenced him by slamming down the pot suddenly. “Why do you fight me on this? It’s not a task too difficult for you, is it?” said she, who had until now been rather regal and possessed, showing her displeasure savagely in a vulgar manner. “Do you not see my hands!” She tore the scarf from her wounded hand and clutched the side of his face. “If that treasure does not come into my possession, all my body shall eventually become as this!”

He seemed to shrink with the horror of it, then regained a measure of control. He caught her hand from his face. “What possesses your unnatural heart to think your god will care enough to heal you? This trinket will not appease her.”

“Is it too difficult for you?” she hissed.

“No, not too difficult,” he said, still clutching her wrist, and released her roughly.

“Good,” she said, composing herself. “Then go through with it without more bother to me.”

With trembling fingers she rebound her hand in the black scarf. He looked at those wasted hands and felt no pity. “You have done many wrongs, Astania.”

“If I have done wrong,” said she with scornful grief; “then so have you, yet it is I alone who suffer.” She turned from him with a movement of impatience. She wanted to retreat somewhere hidden from all eyes.

This was an unpleasant discourse for Orsious; he wished it ended. “Where is my daughter?” he asked, rising from his seat to depart. “I wish to see her.”

“She is set attentively upon a given task for the present,” said the high priestess, refusing his request scornfully.

“Then release her from the task and have her come to me,” he said. “I will speak with the boy later this morning.”

“As you please,” she said, following him to the door. As he was to leave, she said artfully, “We look forward to your contribution.” Slowly, she pressed her lips upon his cheek, lingering too long to be modest, and the poison that ran in her veins went into his blood and tissue, causing him some pain. He snatched his face from her contaminating kiss with a scowl. “Do not disappoint me,” she warned with whispered vehemence.

He took his leave with the impotent rage one feels when in the power of another.

Orsious spent the early half of the morning with his daughter. Her presence forgotten, she lingered in the library adjoining his study, awaiting a moment when she could take her leave in search of a particular young man whose lips had impressed warmth not only upon her lips but her heart. Magenta was adrift with languishing thoughts, perusing a bookcase for a book. From the other room she heard her father speak, but not to her. Then came a voice that sent blood to her heart and colour to her cheek. She recognized the beloved voice at once.

Orsious sat at his table. Four men had entered his study, one of whom was the dark-haired young man he sought. The other three were rangers who worked for him. He rose to his feet to greet the newcomer. “Ah, you have come, good.”

“Did I have a choice?” Deacon eyed the three men who had retrieved him. One he recognized as the man who harassed Magenta at the emporium. Fraomar stood against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. The other two stood behind Deacon as guards might stand behind a prisoner.

On the table were a loaf of bread, an earthenware dish containing butter, a cheese wedge, roast beef, and a carafe filled with wine. To these Orsious immediately turned his attention, offering the guest to partake of what he wished. He wanted to appear accommodating after such a rude summoning. Deacon stood unmoved, his attention steady on the older man, who poured himself wine. Their two wills were already strained between them.

From the other room, Magenta silently awaited their words. She felt alarmed and anxious to know what business her father had with him. She could not distinctly hear what passed between them but caught pieces enough to know Deacon was pressed with some proposition which he refused.

“I have no interest,” said Deacon again. “I don’t want any participation in a cause, feel no responsibility, and seek no advantage. Keep your coin-purse in your pocket.”

Orsious replied, “Do not make your decision in such haste. Every man has his price, not always in gold. You would not be here meddling in spell books if you did not want something. Dine with me tonight, and we can discuss it.”

“You’ll have to find another,” asserted Deacon. “I’ll be gone this day and will not come back.”

Magenta heard these words, and it was as though a cruel wind had suddenly extinguished a lamp. Only the night before he had not breathed a

word about his departure.

As Deacon turned to leave, the door slammed shut before him, as if struck by some unseen force. Magenta started at the loud bang, followed by her father's vibrating voice of authority. She rushed out to where she saw Deacon sinking under the strength of two men. After resisting only a short moment, he suddenly desisted. His eyes had caught Magenta—pale and struggling to contain her bitter disappointment.

Fraomar watched this exchange. He saw Deacon's countenance fall, her pale lips quiver, and a realization crept bitterly upon him. Steeling himself against her, Deacon turned away his face, looking sideways, downward, to avoid her eyes. Froamar observed what passed between them, and it roused in him a fierce jealousy. In his heart he vowed he would kill the wretch at his first chance.

"Remove her," said Orsious, motioning to his daughter.

"I'll see her safely home," offered Fraomar, officiously. Deacon looked over to him. Their eyes met for mere seconds, but already the two men had made enemies of one another.

Orsious approached Deacon. In the imprisonment of his captors' hands he remained upright, his jaw defiantly firm. "We shall discuss matters further, when you've had time to think about them," said Orsious, speaking from a height of conscious superiority. Deacon made no reply and was half-dragged from the room.

* * *

Moments after, Fraomar led Magenta home. His hands did not venture near her. She walked with him in silence. She wondered why Deacon had not told her of his leaving but would not harden her heart against him, not without first knowing the reason behind his actions. She thought for certain it must have been his intention to come to her if he had not been detained, but his look of guilty misery told her otherwise.

Fraomar, walking at her shoulder, broke her scrutiny, saying, “Your mind lingers on that poor fool.” Her face remained turned forward, giving no indication of her thoughts, but she listened intently. “He should have accepted Orsious’s proposal. Now he’ll suffer. If he knows what’s best for him, he’ll revise his decision. He will have time, at least, to think of it in his cell.” Fraomar laughed. “I despise the wretch,” he said, with a vindictiveness as unexpected as the declaration. At his words Magenta could scarcely suppress the outward manifestations of her wrath. “Had your father no use for him, I would cut his throat. Even now, I consider paying him a visit to let him taste what is to come.”

All the time he was speaking, her feelings of offence became more and more intense. “What purpose does it serve?” she said coolly. For a moment he spoke nothing. But when his utterance came it was with significance.

“You love him,” he said, turning to observe the effect of his words. She paused in her step, growing pale as if he now knew her guarded secret and would use it against her. Satisfied by her reaction, he continued, “While I so senselessly attempted to earn your heart, it was all the time occupied, a condition you made certain to conceal from me. Now the love you have killed has turned into rancour, and that bitterness he shall taste, till life itself becomes a punishment and a burden. He will find in me the worst of enemies,” said Fraomar with a look of implacable menace.

Magenta’s mind and heart ran hot. For a moment she was overcome, her breath coming deep and tremulous. Then she said, slowly and with perfect clarity, “Should you dare to touch him, I swear neither devils below nor angels above will save you from the misery that will befall your accursed head. I will make you feel, by the forces of hell, the full meaning of a woman’s hatred. In me you will find the worst of enemies.”

“Bravely spoken,” he said. “You have my word, sweet one; I’ll not touch him. However, you should know in places such as Gilaad it’s hard to prevent such things occurring.” He saw her eyes darken with anger, her bosom rise and fall, and knew she wanted to kill him. It gave him a peculiar satisfaction to know he induced such strong sentiments within her, even if it was to his own detriment. “Come,” he said. “Don’t stand away from me; I will take you home.”

“My home is locked away with my heart at Gilaad.” With that she left him.

Not far from the mages’ guild was an old archery courtyard. It was rarely frequented since the construction of the new court. Magenta went there sometimes. Cedrik and Derek had not seen Deacon since the men took him away earlier in the day. They were on their way home from the guild where they had gone in search of answers, but from which they had received none, when Derek glimpsed the priestess in the courtyard. He stopped, abruptly holding Cedrik back with an open palm to his stomach. Cedrik groaned with the breath knocked from him.

“Let’s ask her.” Derek nudged him hard and nodded to Magenta. In her hands she held a finely crafted bow drawn and notched with an arrow, the intensity of her concentration a little frightening. She released the arrow, very precisely and cleanly, striking the target with great accuracy. Holding his stomach, Cedrik followed Derek’s lead. She alone was there. Intently focused, she made no effort to acknowledge their presence.

Cedrik, approaching with some caution, introduced himself and Derek and told her, in the form of a question, that he believed she was acquainted with their cousin. Magenta lowered the bow. She seemed startled, as if she had been snatched from a deep reverie. “Deacon,” she said, a slight frown in her brow.

“That’s him,” said Derek. His attention was fixed on her with intense fascination. All this while he had wanted to see a dark priestess.

“Some men came this morning for him,” said Cedrik. “We haven’t seen him since, and no explanation was given to us.”

“He is being held at Gilaad,” she said, “a place of confinement for those who indulge in the misapplication of magic. Other things take place there of which I know little.”

“Why is he being held? What did he do?” said Cedrik. That it had not been the first time did not lessen his anxiety.

“He refused a proposition. No one refuses my father,” she said with resentment.

“He won’t hurt him, will he?” asked Derek.

“Your father, you say?” asked Cedrik. “I don’t suppose there’s anything you can do to sort this matter?”

“No, I fear not.”

Cedrik nodded, his mind working.

Magenta asked, “Where are you staying?”

“In one of the cottages by the lake.”

“Meet me after dark by the edge of the wood,” she said, “and I will help you retrieve your cousin.”

Cedrik was about to protest. He would rather not go against the law, but something in her expression compelled him to agree.

The moment the brothers returned to the cottage, Cade said to them, “Well, what’s happened with him, then?”

“He’s being held at Gilaad,” answered Derek.

Cade snorted. “The fool has been here for how long?” he said, amused. “Never mind. They’ll rough him a little, teach him a lesson or two, then release him back into the wild.”

“No I don’t think so,” said Cedrik. “The woman said his life was on the line.”

“What woman?”

“One of the priestesses was there.”

“A priestess!” Cade repeated, hotly. “Does no one ever listen to me? Don’t put trust in a single word she spoke. Deceit is all that can come from those lips.”

“I did not misdoubt her words,” said Cedrik, his tone serious.

“If you’re truly convinced his life’s endangered …” Cade let out a resigned breath. “I have some friends who might be able to help.”

With the calm, blind manner of one who has set her will to a task from which there is no return, Magenta took into her possession several small evil-filled vials. Setting her foot on the edge of her bed, she slipped as many of these as she could into the slots of her leather boot, meant for that purpose, and more into a band that strapped round her upper thigh. When she could carry no more she drew down the skirt of her gown, concealing the treachery, and went to the window.

It was several hours until darkfall, when she had arranged for the boatman to be awaiting her. Stepping out the window, clinging to what she could, Magenta began the precarious descent down the wall. It was a difficult undertaking for any maiden, especially one so unaccustomed to physical exertion. Several times she slipped, and for a moment she was afraid, but her will and determination sustained her. She would free Deacon. She meant to leave with him this night and not return.

Chapter 32
The Escape

The dull evening light crept slowly over the cottages and at last began to die away into darkness. “Where are they?” asked Derek with excited nerves, as the three men stood awaiting their accomplices.

“They’ll be here soon,” answered Cade and rubbed his hands together briskly to keep them warm. He swore and sat down on the porch steps. “It *would* have to be the coldest night yet.”

Behind him stood Cedrik, who remained very quiet, very still. He knew it was a venture fraught with danger not to be taken lightly. At his hip was his sword. Cade shifted uncomfortably. He hated that everyone was so silent and yet did not feel compelled to break the silence himself.

Two young men came toward the cottage with swift purposeful steps. Cade rose to his feet, and the brothers went with him to met the arrivals. Carson, a sturdy boy of nineteen, had unkept brown hair and light blue eyes. His countenance, which was by no means unpleasing, was youthful in its expression and full of devilment. Bayne was a slender, swarthy young man of twenty-two. He had a good-looking face, with a straight nose and a full mouth, and eyes that spoke of trouble under the dark lashes. He wore an expression of pride, accompanied by a degree of hostility. He had an old scar from a nasty gnash on his left brow. Both exuded a great deal of self-assurance and daredevilry.

“We stopped by the alchemist and got some bang berries,” said Carson with a broad smile. “They won’t do any damage, but when hot they make a whole lot of noise.”

“What are we to use them for?” asked Cedrik, examining the pouch.

“A distraction,” said Bayne. “When it reaches a certain temperature—boom!” His sudden exclamation made Derek flinch. “It’ll sound like half

the damned roof is coming down! Carson used to throw it into the baker's oven when his back was turned—used to drive the old man into a fury of insanity."

"Have you ever attempted this before?" Cedrik asked, fearing he was dealing with two foolish rogues.

"No, but we've thought about it many times," Carson said.

"We've both been in the lockup before," said Bayne. "We know our way round somewhat."

Knowing he had little choice in the matter, Cedrik reluctantly stated his gratitude for their assistance.

"I just want to hurt someone," replied Bayne. Cedrik frowned but said nothing.

Here they laid their plans as to how they were to operate and soon set off. Cedrik said uneasily, "We must first go down by the edge of the woods. There's one other to join our party."

None of them inquired whom they would be meeting. Among the shadows of the trees nothing could be seen but the vague shape of her long, slender form. She wore a close-fitting, black gown, which left her throat and arms bare. Her face was bent down as if she suffered some trouble of mind. Unwittingly Carson and Bayne approached. They slowed considerably in their steps, approaching realization, till they came to a complete standstill. Mistrust was in their eyes as they saw her, and curiosity too. Sensible of their presence, Magenta lifted her eyes with a steadiness of gaze which stole upon the hearts of her beholders and haunted them to their cores. There was no bloom on her cheek, but unearthly whiteness.

Shortly after his companions, Cade became aware of her and suddenly stopped, clutching Cedrik's shoulder. "Hold a minute—a priestess?" Cade whispered harshly. "Have you lost your mind?"

Like a bunch of dazed fools, they stood and gazed upon her. A faded scent of flowers was in the air. The singular beauty of her aspect was not what held them enthralled, but some emotion aroused by the unknown and the deeper instinct of dread. From the shadow she came forward as unexpectedly and as soundlessly as an apparition, and the men were as truly startled as if she were. With evident reluctance they were forced to come forward and meet her.

They did not gather close but hung back and allowed Cedrik to address her. “There have been some alterations to the plan,” he said, looking back at his companions, as if seeking their assistance in explanation. Magenta waited, confusion on her brow.

Bayne said shortly, “They came to us for assistance. We devised a plan. That explains it.” She looked at Bayne, and his first impulse was to avert his eyes, but he resisted the urge and held her gaze. “Are we to go now, or stand the whole night here chattering?”

“Where are we to go from here?” she asked, without resistance.

“What?” said Bayne. “You’re not to come.” He said to Cedrik, “There’ll be some harsh things taking place, and I don’t want some delicate creature that I have to constantly survey along the way coming with us.”

“Tell us first what you had in mind, and we’ll compare our options,” Cedrik said to Magenta.

Bayne confronted Cedrik with one despairing word, “Fool!” then waited sullenly, arms folded. Magenta explained in the simplest terms what design she had meant to put into effect. Cedrik was not against it and saw that Carson was considering it, while Bayne, he knew from the shadow on his face, understood nothing of what was said.

“That’s the complicated way. We’ll do it our way,” said Bayne. Carson agreed, followed shortly by the others. Silently Bayne exulted in their decision, all the while watching her with distrust. “We’re in no need of your help, priestess.”

“Nevertheless, I will remain with you.” As she moved forward he threw out his arm as if he would catch her. She halted and looked to him.

“I said you’re not to come,” he insisted. He didn’t back away but quailed under the intensity of her offence.

“Think not to intimidate me!” she said with cold fury. “You may come, or you may remain, but you cannot prevent me.” A foreboding breeze played through her hair, and the insidious scent of flowers unnerved him. Faltering in his courage, he lowered his arm, and with some muttered, scornful remark allowed her to pass.

“Let us make haste,” said Cedrik, feeling they had lost enough time.

From here they went through the streets of Cheydon, lighted at intervals by open-flame lamps, until they came to a broad, austere structure but a short distance from the mages’ guild. Concealed among a cluster of small trees, the companions observed their objective, the whole bearing a most fort-like and unhospitable appearance.

“Many pass through the entrance without being subject to scrutiny,” said Bayne. “We’ll stagger our approach so as not to draw attention to ourselves and meet again once inside.” He motioned to Derek and Carson. “You two go first with Cedrik. Cade and I will follow after with her.” He looked at Magenta, his gaze lingering with curious interest, but she, feeling he was against her, would not look toward him.

All manner of people passed in and out of the entrance at various times. Taking advantage of this, Cedrik and his two companions blended with others and remained unperceived. When Bayne saw that they had entered unchallenged, he turned to the two left with him. “That went off without a hitch,” he said, with an insufferable smile.

Once inside Bayne broke from Magenta and Cade toward the administration quarters, while they continued left round a bend to their awaiting fellow-conspirators. In this area Bayne sought to put into effect his scheme of distraction. Close by the door, where several guards stood posted, he sighted a large open flame in a cast-iron plate. To this he made

his way with purpose till, coming toward him, he glimpsed a face that he recognized, and he knew the person would recognize him. Swiftly and without breaking stride, he redirected his step, turning and walking with his back to the known individual, keeping his face down. Only when the threat had passed him by, did he turn and redirect himself toward the flame. Leaning over the plate, careful not to catch himself on fire, he set down the heat-sensitive pouch, trying to arrange it in the ideal place so as not to heat too quickly. Try as he did to remain inconspicuous, his manner did not escape the shrewd notice of one of the guards.

Bayne continued in his task when a male voice came from close behind. “What are you meddling with there?” He rose sharply, as if caught in the perpetration of some questionable act. Facing the guard he stuttered some excuse that came first to mind, feeling beneath his tattered cloak for the hilt of a dagger which was hidden there.

The guard eyed him suspiciously, then, evidently taking him for a fool, turned away. Bayne breathed a sigh of relief, making certain that in his distraction he hadn’t placed the pouch too close to the flame. He didn’t want it to set off prematurely. The guard catching this over his shoulder saw that he was at it again, swung back and confronted him forcefully: “Leave it alone or so help me, I’ll beat you an inch from death! What’s your purpose here?”

“I’ve just been released,” he lied.

“Then be on your way before I toss you back in.” The guard took hold of him roughly and shoved him in the direction he ought be going. Bayne stumbled off in the path he had been propelled, hands raised to show he meant no harm. The guard looked after him a moment and bent to see what the mischief-maker was so intent upon. From over his shoulder Bayne watched to see if he would be discovered in his crime, and with a quick, subtle motion of his hand, caused the flame to flare, almost searing the guard’s face.

The guard withdrew from the flame and convinced there was nothing there, moved on. Bayne smiled to himself, left the entrance area, and rejoined his companions who awaited him round a bend. All six

companions stole down the corridor that led to the right apartment. Before reaching the door, however, they paused, pressed against the wall to make certain no one was coming round the corner.

Already feeling the strain, Derek whispered to Bayne, “Can you not make us imperceptible to the eye?”

“No.”

“What kind of mage are you?”

Annoyed by the chatter, Cedrik whispered harshly, “One that can hurt you. Now be quiet.” He peered round the corner. He saw no one, but the sound of boots came to his keen ear. There was no doubt some one was approaching. Cedrik slowly drew his sword and indicated someone was coming.

Pressed against the wall, gripping the weapon, he awaited his moment. No sooner had the unsuspecting man passed them, than down came the hilt of the sword effectively and sharply on his head. He staggered against the wall, half-stunned. Cedrik, grabbing him roughly by the collar, followed the blow with another from his fist, which knocked the man completely insensible. Derek stood over the limp body where it lay. “I think you killed him,” he said, horrified, though not without some admiration.

“He has not died,” said Cedrik impatiently.

“He’s just messed up,” said Bayne. “But he’s going to wish he were dead when he wakes.” He had taken enough blows to the head to know what it was to come to after a particularly nasty one.

“Help me move him,” said Cedrik and stooped down. He and Derek dragged the body back round the corner, away from the main corridor.

“Someone’s bound to come upon him here,” said Carson.

Further on one of them discovered a small storage room. Here they determined to hide him, leaving him crumpled on the floor. Then they went

back down the corridor. Without warning the very door they approached swung open toward them. Quickly, while still blocked by the door, they turned and went back round the corner, keeping close to the wall. Several men clad in red robes passed from the chamber and continued away from them.

Presently, Cedrik bent his head round, and upon seeing the way was clear, hastened forward, followed by the others. At the door he tried to draw the bolts and received a painful, jolting charge through the hand and arm that buckled his fingers. A startled oath flew from his mouth, and he withdrew.

“It’s charmed,” said Bayne, pushing past. He hovered his palm over the lock, focused his attention, and received a charge that knocked his hand back. Carson gave a snorting laugh. Bayne wanted to beat the humour out of him, but knew there was no time. Again he tried and received the same painful result. He cursed it and, using his other hand, was about to try again when Magenta’s voice of warning came.

“Should you fail a third time, an alarm will be set forth,” she said, coming forward. He backed swiftly out of her path, so she needn’t touch him. She poised her palm over the lock—there was a flash of light and it jolted open.

“Lock your valuables,” said Derek and threw an impressed look back at his brother.

Bayne reached and opened the door for her. “You may go first,” he said. “I don’t like you at my back.” Without a second thought of him, she passed through and continued ahead of them, with Bayne directly behind her. The sound of movement reached his ears more swiftly than it did hers and, swifter still, he caught the skirt of her dress, to prevent her from continuing forward and alerting the individual of their presence. Around the jutting out of the wall, in a small recess, he glimpsed the shoulder of an off-duty guard, sitting at a table, upon which was a bottle of wine and a loaf of rye bread.

With a jerk of the head Bayne indicated for her to fall back. She did this while he crept forward. He stole warily up to the guard. In his hand he

gripped the dagger he drew from his cloak, and, as the hapless man rose up, the point of that keen blade plunged soundless into his back, through his heart, at the same instant that Bayne's free hand swung up and covered his mouth. There was no struggle, no sound. Bayne clenched the convulsive body, then with a callous push, pitched it forward to the floor. Magenta winced at the reckless brutality, but she had gone too far to pull out now.

The room which they entered had doors on three sides. They required no door, however, but rather the wall to the far right, through which they meant to get at the holding cells on the other side. Carson at once set to his task. He was to transmute the mortar around each brick into mud, thereby allowing the loosened brick to slide out freely. While he did this, the others gathered apprehensively about his crouched form.

"Go listen by that door," Cedrik said to his brother and instructed Cade to watch the second door. Bayne took himself over by the third and listened. Cedrik stood with his back to them, watching to see how Carson fared in bringing down part of the wall. It was a slower process than Cedrik would have liked. He felt anxious they would be discovered, and several times he turned, convinced he had heard steps.

The faint sounds of clanking armour would come to Derek's attentive ears at intervals, never close enough to think they were coming to the door, but soon he heard quick, yet heavy steps approaching louder and louder, till there was no doubt someone was about to enter. "Someone's coming," he whispered urgently.

There was a sound—a drawing of bolts. Cedrik turned hastily just as the door opened, and kicked it closed, smashing it into the guard's face, who staggered backward, half-stunned, with a bloodied nose. Cedrik wasted no time before bounding onto the man, grappling him to the ground. There was not a large disparity in weight between the two men, but in the dominant position Cedrik easily overpowered him, pressing his forearm down across the throat, choking him unconscious.

While he did this, Derek attended to the guard behind. Taking advantage of the surprise, he landed a sharp blow to the guard's jaw with such a hard

knock he felled him on the spot. Derek could easily have killed the man, had such been his desire, but he could not bring himself to the point.

Cedrik meanwhile rose from his unconscious foe. The chivalry he would usually abide was disregarded, and he plunged his blade through the man's chest. He then did the same to the other at Derek's feet, while Derek, who had never taken a life nor witnessed his brother take the life of man, stood breathless and overwhelmed.

Cedrik clutched his brother round the back of the neck. "Are you holding?" Derek nodded hurriedly, as if numbed by a chill. Cedrik looked over at the companions and saw that enough of the wall was down for them to pass through.

"This is going better than I thought," said Cade with relief.

"It will not go so easy when we come nearer to the holding area," said Carson as he ducked through the narrow aperture he had produced, leading the way.

In his cell Deacon stood aimless. He was shackled in wrist irons, made of a particular alloy that had negating properties. These bonds did not render him entirely useless but made it exceedingly difficult for him to draw on any amount of strength. The holding cell was isolated from the others, situated in the middle of the chamber, entirely closed in with no windows but for the one set in the iron-bound door, equipped with thick bars.

A single man stood posted in front. He was not a city guard but one of the rangers who worked for Orsious. Further down from here several guards were posted at the entrance; they could not be seen from the prisoner's view. Deacon leaned his brow against the cold bars, hanging his arms limply through the spaces between them.

"You cannot keep me here. I've done nothing wrong!" he said, his voice rising in agitation, but the guard paid no more attention to him than if he had not spoken at all. Deacon's hands were hanging down near to the lock. He made a subtle gesture, and for its attempt was inflicted with a charge. He swore and withdrew his hand. He had known how it would be, but had done

it merely to satisfy his own knowing and to test the effect of his hindered strength.

The guard took a step forward and said, “Damn you, do not tempt me!”

From their unusual entry point, the perpetrators passed behind Deacon’s cell. To their left more holding chambers extended, forming a narrow corridor with cells on either side. These they swiftly passed, determining that Deacon would be held in the centre chamber, which was used for interrogation. Coming round the side of his cell, they came upon several guards posted at the entrance. The first guard to see them came to attention, startled, his hand reaching for the hilt of his sword. His violent start caused the others to do likewise. Out flashed the swords from their sheaths. No words were exchanged; the perpetrators’ intentions were too clear to necessitate any conversation. Bayne, with a single movement, snatched the concealed knife from his boot and hurled it into the throat of the first guard before the blade was fully drawn—he rushed forward to retrieve it mere seconds after it had left his hand. With that the two sides fell upon each other.

As yet unaware of his companions’ proximity, Deacon remained leaning, his brow pressed against the bars, his hands hanging limp through them, suffering the lull of inaction.

“Pull your arms back in before I break them off,” threatened the guard. Even with the restraints he didn’t trust the prisoner’s abilities. He stepped forward but then was distracted by the sound of conflict. There was a commotion at one side of the room. In that moment of distraction, just as he turned his face, Deacon made a sharp, sudden gesture which dashed the guard’s head against the wall and rendered him consciousless. The man laid sprawled, inert upon the floor.

Out from the corridor where the other cells where situated came three armed guards, hastening to the side of their associates, who still offered resistance against the perpetrators. Cedrik was so ruthless it seemed he was determined to disarm the whole party on his own. Magenta passed ahead of the hostilities and went toward Deacon’s cell. One of the defending guards, determining her intent, hastened to intercept her, but Bayne was after him a

few seconds later and broadsided him. Both men fell and smashed into the floor. Only Bayne rose from the struggle. Seizing the guard's sword, he cut the exposed throat and, thus armed, followed Magenta.

Deacon, after hearing the commotion, was aching to get out. Even with his heavily restrained energies, he tried to break the chain that served as a tether. When Magenta suddenly appeared at the door, he drew up straight, as if she were the last person he thought to see. "Are you hurt?" was the first thing she said, touching his face through the bars. She placed her hand over the lock. He caught her wrist.

"It's difficult," he said.

"Let her," came Bayne's ruthless voice. "She's a criminal." Deacon released her, wary of the unfamiliar face. Magenta at once attempted to release the lock. Bayne planted his feet either side of the unconscious body of the ranger, and stooping down, he felt for the keys. Cedrik and the others had managed to subdue the resistance and stood at the entrance on guard, waiting for any who might venture through.

Cade came to stand by Bayne, who found the key-ring, attached still by a chain, and tore it free. He held it up. "Damn me!" His heart sank at how many keys there were. "Who is this man?" Before stepping away from the body, he gave the insensible guard a good, sharp kick in the side. "He'll feel that when he wakes."

"Quickly, quickly," said Cade.

In the opened doorway to the cell, Deacon waited, unable to move further out. He said to Magenta, "I wish you hadn't come." Beneath the concern was something decidedly cold and impersonal. Pain came into her face, so subtle that only he could have noticed. "Are my cousins here?"

"They wait down the hall," Magenta told him. From his view he could not see them. She wanted to throw her arms about him and hold him close, but the strangeness of his manner kept her away. Bayne broke in rudely on their exchange and grabbed Deacon's wrists. "Hold still, sweetheart, we'll get you out." He winked and proceeded to try different keys. Cade stood

next to him, trying to determine progress, his gaze lifting occasionally to see how his companions far down at the end fared.

Cedrik, Derek, and Carson stood on either side of the entrance, out of view from any who might come down the hall. Cedrik nursed several nasty sword-gashes and regretted the absence of the armour to which he was accustomed. The other two were also well-beaten, but no wound required immediate address. Carson observed the younger brother's ashen face—blood that was not his own smeared his cheek. "Don't feel remorse," he said. "These guards are miserable sons-of-dogs. I have scars still upon my body from their hands."

"Hush, do not speak," said Cedrik. He wanted to listen for anyone coming. Moments after, they heard faint steps approaching. The instant the individual entered, Carson came forward. Seeing it was a woman, not a guard, the blow he meant to deal swiftly changed. Instead he caught her by the shoulders and dashed her against the wall, throwing his weight against her. He clapped his hand over the startled mouth, but not before a faint cry had reached the ear of a man who followed. It alerted him and gave time enough to ready himself. Sword drawn, he blocked the first attack. He retreated up the hall and sent forth sharp, alarming calls. Cedrik went after him, and in a moment disarmed and silenced him, but it was too late. Nearby guards had heard the alarm and were at once rushing forth. Cedrik turned and ran.

The woman Carson had pinned against the wall remained helplessly passive. An intensified fear showed on her brow when her gaze fell upon the dead guards who lay behind him. Carson, not knowing what else to do with her, drew the strings from his leather pants and bound her hands. He pushed her to the floor in a corner and was threatening her into silence when Cedrik ran into the room in a mad haste, his sword drawn. Carson and Derek heard the heavy clanking of armour, which left no doubt a number of well-armed men were coming after him.

While all this went on, Bayne worked at freeing the prisoner. Cade hovered anxiously, urging him to be quick with the task. "You tried that one already."

“No. I did not,” answered Bayne, undaunted.

The commotion at the entrance caught Cade’s attention. Panicking, he bent close, so he spoke right to the other’s ear and said with emphasis, “Hurry up.”

Bayne turned to him, provoked. “I will stick you with this key!” In that same instant they both turned and saw their companions engaged in fending off the impending onslaught of guards. Seeing them begin to falter under the weight of the attack, Cade began to lose his nerve and said, “Are you sure we shouldn’t have gone with the first plan?”

“Sh-h!” said Bayne, hurrying to unlock the prisoner’s bonds. Just as a barrage of guards came through the entrance, Deacon stepped free of his cell, sending out a pulse of electricity that stunned and collapsed their bodies. Before they could recover from the paralysis, the companions regrouped and hastened down behind the cell to where they had secretly infiltrated. Instead of turning left, out through the door by which they had entered, they continued through, stepping over the two guards Cedrik and Derek had previously brought down. Leading the way, Bayne turned their steps toward an outer wall. As fortune would have it, they met no resistance on their path.

“We are to go through there,” Bayne said, pointing to the wall ahead. Before Carson had a chance to hasten forward and set to the tedious task of removing each brick, Deacon threw all his will against it. As if hit by some tremendous force, the stone burst and shattered, leaving a gaping hole. The fugitives halted briefly, stunned by the startling force, then continued through. Outside, in the limited space between the structure and outer city wall, Bayne asked Deacon, “Can you seal it back up?” He knew everyone in the place would be on their heels in less than fifteen minutes.

Deacon shook his head, bent over as if out of breath.

“It matters little,” said Bayne, turning to the wall. Focusing his attention, he deformed the surface of the stone, producing indentations and protrusions suitable for foot and hand holds. Deacon set his boot on the first

step and set all his weight on it. It was a only a fifteen-foot wall, but it would not do for any of them to fall and break a bone.

“Let your woman go before us,” said Bayne, in the tone of an order, thinking if anything should go wrong she would be the first to suffer it. Deacon paid no attention and commenced his ascent. He scaled the wall effortlessly and without fear.

Magenta started soon after him. When she neared the top, her wrists were grasped from above, and she was hauled up the rest of the way. Standing precariously atop the wall, Deacon held her close. “Hang down to the full length of your arms before you let go,” he instructed her. He went first, stepping off the edge and landing steadily upon his feet.

Carefully Magenta slid over the side, hanging with her body flat against the stone, arms fully extended. Deacon stood at the base waiting for her. As she dropped, he reached up and caught her round the waist to lessen the fall. In his arms she caught her balance and turned to him. When he determined she was unharmed, they swiftly moved out of the path for others who followed quickly behind. Bayne was the last. He landed hard and scrambled to his feet. “Your horses are tied over in those trees,” he said, wincing with a pained ankle. He indicated the thicket of trees a small distance away.

“Where are you going to?” asked Cedrik. He knew the search would be on and that none might traverse the streets of Cheydon without being subject to interrogation.

“There’s a tavern not far from here,” said Carson. “We’ll wait it out there and head back into the front gates with the morning trade.”

“You’d better clear off, then,” said Bayne. After farewell handclasps the Cheydon boys broke away in the other direction. Magenta went with Deacon, Cedrik and Derek. They slipped quickly into the trees, looking to retrieve the horses, of which were only three. They had not realized that she was to come with them. Without a word, Deacon held back, gently drawing her to a standstill with him. He turned only partly to face her, his eyes downcast. She was pressed softly against him, wondering. He waited while the brothers continued on ahead of them before he spoke.

“You cannot come with me,” he said in a low, firm voice, so only she could hear. He did not lift his eyes. Her heart sank within her and seemed to die. She could endure cold, wet or hunger, she had even borne Infliction, but the thought of being forever divided from him was as utterly unendurable as being asked not to breathe. “Return to your father,” he said quietly. She stood silent as if she could not move. He suffered. He was going to move.

A sob rose in her throat. “Deacon—” He had begun to turn, but her plea arrested him. “All that I hold dear will be torn away with you.” She pleaded so softly no other ears heard. She sought his hand plaintively and pressed close against him. Though her touch was light, he felt as if she were hanging off the edge of a precipice and his strength alone would keep her from falling. He could feel himself being dragged down with her. Unable to endure her face as he let her slip and fall, he stooped down to whisper. She felt his smooth cheek brush her own, his lips against her ear, the words rapid and almost senseless, succeeded in a suspension of consciousness. She hadn’t a chance even to apprehend the meaning before she drooped in his arms. Gently he lowered her to the soft earth.

“What did you do to her!” came Derek’s voice of alarm. Cedrik and Derek both went over to Deacon, bringing the horses with them. “Don’t do your accursed magic on her!” said Derek, crouching down to see if she was all right, but he couldn’t make her stir.

“Let us move on,” said Deacon, taking the reins of his horse from Cedrik. “It’ll not be long before we are discovered here.”

Cedrik frowned. “We can’t just leave her here,” he said. He felt it would be wrong to leave the young woman to such a fate, especially after she had risked herself for Deacon’s freedom. “You cannot just leave her here in this state.” Glancing down at her, she looked very vulnerable. “Anyone who comes along may do what they will with her.”

“She is a priestess,” said Deacon. “Guards that will be here all too soon will take her back to her father and us with her if we don’t move.” Cedrik looked at him, hardly convinced. “They would fear any other action,” Deacon said.

“And I suppose going back to her father, after disobeying him and freeing you, is not going to go bad for her? I met the man only briefly, but he left a vivid impression. Do you really wish to bring his anger down upon her?”

They were quickly running out of time, and Deacon knew Cedrik would have his way.

“She comes with us,” Cedrik persisted. “She can decide for herself where she goes thereafter.”

Deacon hesitated a moment then lifted her dead weight into his arms. “She’s in your care,” he said, bearing her to Cedrik’s horse. The latter assisted Deacon and between their efforts, successfully secured her. Cedrik pulled himself onto the horse behind her, supporting her in his arms. Deacon briskly mounted his own horse. “It will be a wearisome journey for you, till she wakes.”

Cedrik glanced at him angrily, then with a sharp kick to the beast’s side made off. They had not travelled far when Deacon drew rein and, leaping down, created behind them an airy mass. Any sign of their tracks disappeared as if they had vanished into the blowing night like a confusion of dust.

Chapter 33
Commencement

Before the night was ended, the fleeing companions had set up camp and prepared a hot meal. Near at hand, three tents made a ring around them. Remaining in a swoon, Magenta lay near the fire. Her kind-natured overseer had draped a blanket about her shoulders and smoothed her brow free of care.

The three men ate in silence, weary and worn, the firelight close round them. Their hearts had been bruised. The youngest sat quietly, miserable after the misadventures of the night. He seemed to forget the plate in his hand. Deacon sat with a map spread out over his lap, tracing his course.

Cedrik broke in on the quiet. “Where are you to go from here?”

“My course is as yet undecided,” was the vague answer.

“You will not go to Terium?”

Deacon looked up. He was not entirely surprised. He knew Cade could not have helped but open his mouth. “I had considered it,” he said, binding himself to nothing. Cedrik knew he was lying; his will was intent upon it still.

“Why do you not come to the Imperial? You will be safe there. Both of you.” He glanced down at the sleeping woman.

Deacon shook his head. “I don’t need protection. You may take her with you.”

“I would, but I doubt she’ll be persuaded easily to leave your side.”

“She has little choice in the matter,” said Deacon. “I’ll not take her with me. She may return with you, or she may venture elsewhere, but she cannot

remain with me. When do you suppose to leave?”

“Unless Derek feels the need to return home directly, we’ll remain with you for a time yet. I really think it would be best to return home,” said Cedrik.

“Do you?” said Deacon. “Then why not return? I’ll not stop you.”

“Why are you so eager to be rid of us?”

“I’m not certain if you recall, but I didn’t want you to come with me in the first place. But you do as you will.”

“Where are you to go?”

“I told you, I don’t know.”

Cedrik frowned and left it alone. Deacon reached and took up a plate. The map that lay open on his knees he put aside. He put food to lips as if with an involuntary action. Presently his eyes drifted to the figure softly breathing. The dim glow of firelight spread warmth over her features, the blanket draped over her had fallen loose, and he could see the soft white curve of her breast, gently lifting and falling with each breath. With quiet absorption, he continued to gaze at her.

“She’s beautiful,” Derek said after a time. Deacon glanced up at him, not realizing he had been watching all this while. Deacon mumbled a vague assent, then returned his attention to the plate, taking a forced mouthful. It was not long, however, until his eyes strayed over again.

“Will she be like that all the night?” asked Cedrik.

Deacon shook his head; he didn’t know.

“You did this without knowing the results?”

Not long had they discussed her, when they saw the object of their conversation begin to stir. The dark began to drift clear of her vision, and Magenta soon saw the blaze of a small fire and could feel its warmth. The

smell of roasted meat came to her and nauseated her. A rolled blanket had been placed gently under her head, though it still ached.

She couldn't at first grasp any orientation. Languid with a sleepy warmth, she began to sit up and felt gentle hands assisting her; though they did little more than rest lightly on her shoulders, she was grateful for the gesture of kindness. It was Deacon whom she expected to see, but she looked instead into the face of Cedrik, his young and fair features filled with gentle concern. His eyes were not unlike Deacon's—but were a softer, lighter blue, without the black fire.

"Are you well?" he asked with tender sympathy. He knew his cousin would not hurt her intentionally, but magic was involved, and like his father, he mistrusted it. She gave vague assent as she settled to a sitting position; the blanket drawn round her shoulders.

Deacon made no move toward her. At first she gave him no glance of recognition, her mind heavy and clouded, but by degrees the confusion cleared, and she saw him there by the fire. He sat leaning over his knees, a plate held in his hands. He wore plain black leather pants and shirt. He looked grim, inaccessible.

"Is it the same day?" she asked. She had no perception of elapsed time.

"We left Cheydon but a few hours ago," answered Cedrik. Magenta drew the blanket around more closely. She looked to Deacon and wondered why it was not he who crouched over her. She remembered that he had wanted to leave her, that he had whispered strange words, and that a blackness overwhelmed her, but his heart had softened and he had brought her with him. Why then did he sit apart from her?

"You should have something to eat," he said in a toneless voice, offering a plate, which Cedrik, without quitting his touch on her arm, took upon himself to receive, since Deacon made no effort to lean forward. Cedrik offered it to her, but she, with a weary gesture, declined.

"You will feel the worse for it if you don't," said Deacon. He looked at her with dark eyes that she could not understand. She felt cut off from him.

Smiling bleakly at Cedrik, she took the plate and after scarcely putting the food to her lips, put it down again.

Cedrik arose and stepping over his brother's outstretched legs, resumed his seat. The moment he was gone from her side, she felt the fullness of her loneliness. His presence, though light, had sustained her, as the small flame of a candle wards off the darkness in a closed room. In her heart the world seemed dissolved away. Deacon denied himself to her. His face wore that fixed expression where all tokens of emotion were concealed and would give her no more recognition than if she were a stranger.

Magenta bore the strain of belonging to him, yet being unclaimed by him, with an aching heart. She could scarcely endure the empty feeling where he should be. Now and then she looked over, but he seemed to refuse to meet her gaze. His manner confused her. In the few moments in which his attention strayed to her, his face betrayed little emotion. Indeed he looked at her so infrequently, and with such fierce indifference, that a casual observer might not see any suggestion of intimacy beyond that of an acquaintance. But to a more observant onlooker, there was a tenderness in his sideglances that could not be seen when he looked directly at her.

Derek managed to note that the half-averted eyes, the forced avoidance, and her so obvious suffering to it, all declared that there was in fact a bond between them, some shared tenderness in the past. He could not contemplate their manner as implying less.

The night was very dark. All around them was the large, lonely shape of trees. Cedrik was about to approach the subject of their journey and arrangements but thought best to leave it till the morning, when things are always less daunting. Presently Deacon stood. "I'm going to bed." He laid a heavy hand on Cedrik's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Sleep in peace."

Cedrik nodded wearily and let his head hang. Before moving to his tent, Deacon passed brief acknowledgements to the others. Just as he was about to push back the opening and duck to enter, he became conscious of Magenta at his shoulder.

“Am I to remain by your side through the night?” she asked quietly, close to him. She could feel the presence of the other two behind them, burning into her. It was almost insufferable. She wanted to hide herself against him, wanted him to cover her.

“No,” he said. “No, I think not.”

Something seemed to trouble him. He was foreign to her. Magenta glanced back at the brothers who were looking everywhere but at the couple, trying to provide them with a sense of privacy. She lowered her voice further still. “What has happened?” she asked in the anguish of perplexity. “What has changed?” In her soul she felt exposed. She could scarcely bear for him to leave her uncovered. Deacon glanced swiftly at their silent audience and back to her. He remained distant and strange, with an unresponsiveness verging on coldness.

Cedrik had the presence of mind to keep his face down, but Derek was watching from under his eyebrows. There was a kind of intensity between them, a lowered tone, a suggestion of suffering. He could hardly stand it. It was evident she loved Deacon, and by his manner it seemed he gave her reason. It gnawed away at Derek till he was cursing Deacon as a cold, heartless, fickle wretch.

Deacon would say nothing. His silence left her alone with all the agonizing emotions, and she understood that he was terribly exasperated. “There’s enough room for the brothers to share a single tent,” he said in a moment. “That one will be sufficient for you. There’s an extra blanket in my bag should you feel the cold.” He stooped to enter the tent, but she caught his arm in both her hands.

“At what point was I so unfortunate as to offend you?” she asked in cold distress.

“You have not,” he murmured, not looking at her.

“Why then do you distance yourself from me? Why do I see only coldness in your eyes?” He thought he heard tears in her voice, but his lifted gaze only saw perplexity. She whispered, “Why do you despise me?”

“It’s not true,” he said.

“Without a word you were going to leave and never return. Is that not true?” she said with searching, disappointed eyes. “Why do you turn against me?”

He felt her hand pressed on his arm, her touch sad and gentle. She wanted his tenderness. He knew the isolation and the strain his design put upon her and himself. Yet it was what he had to do. He hardened himself further against her. Remorse and misery arose in him, but he answered without a visible sign of either. “Understand I do not despise you,” he murmured. “But do not cling to me—it is but a memory and a dream you chase. I cannot bear the burden of you. You must find your way without me.”

She released his arm, and he saw in her face she would make no further effort towards him. “I shall go away from you.” She could say no more for the very intensity of her feelings. He bent and went away into his tent. For the moment she remained unmoved. She couldn’t turn and face the others. She was too much uncovered, much too exposed. She returned to the fire, but her face was averted. She wished to go somewhere hidden from their eyes.

“Never mind him,” said Derek, gathering up his things to retire for the night. “He’s just a hot-blooded wretch and fears he may injure you.” Magenta winced and said nothing. Derek remained seated, holding his half-gathered things as if forgetful of the task. He tried to begin a conversation about the evening, but it died out and there was silence.

“You may have my bed,” Cedrik offered her, at length. “Someone should keep watch, and I can’t sleep.”

“You must be weary with travel,” she said. Her steady gaze faltered. She could scarcely bear to look at him. Her beloved had left her cold and stripped to the heart.

He shrugged bleakly. “We’re from the Imperial; we don’t sleep. I’ll crash with Derek if the urge to sleep becomes more unbearable than sharing

a bed with him."

"He likes it," said Derek.

Magenta made a painful effort to smile. The helpless quiet remained unbroken. Night, in which everything seems all the more grim, seemed pressing in on them. The sounds of nature were tense and withheld. Cedrik considered her sympathetically. Her look of misery was shadowed with some form of contempt. An angered hurt was in her eyes, black sorrow and ashes in her heart.

"You mustn't judge him too harshly," said Cedrik. "He can be stubborn and not given to showing himself in the best of lights, but he always comes round in the end."

"You needn't defend your cousin," she said, slowly looking up. If not for the softened expression her tone might have been taken for anger. Magenta did not love him the less but began to doubt his heart. Yet in her own she found it difficult to believe he was truly lost to her.

Where Deacon lay he could hear their voices clearly enough to apprehend everything spoken. He waited on all her words, his throat tight, as if he dreaded their persisted consoling might draw from her details of misery he could not bear to hear. He rolled over to lie on his stomach, pressing himself into the bed in anger and torment, feeling sick at heart. He had sought to convince her he no longer loved her and succeeded so far that she resolved to part with him at first chance. If he loved her, he would prevent her from leaving. Having arrived at this hurtful resolution, she said to Cedrik, "At the first city we come upon, I shall part with you. Until then I hope not to prove a burden."

She thought of Deacon as she spoke this and felt a hot, tight spot in her breast. Had he not been concealed from view she would have seen what violent effect her words produced. Deacon lay in utter agony. He waited and nothing more was spoken. All became very quiet. For the moment his misery was greater than his anger. He had denied himself of her and felt the worse for it. He would have liked to have held her while he slept.

Chapter 34
To Sandrine

Deaconwas not pleased to discover Magenta had chosen to break from Cedrik and go her own way but could say nothing about the matter. Regretfully, Deacon told her Sandrine was the nearest city, and should she wish it still, she could stop there. It was a charming, quiet place only slightly off their course, though it would still take many days to get there, even if they rode hard.

In the afternoon they lunched by a pretty stream. Derek took a hot potato from the coals and tossed it deftly in his hand before quickly dropping it on the plate, which he had heaped with salted meats, bread, and cheese. He joined Magenta further down by the stream. Through a mouthful of food, he offered to share with her. Often he made her smile and entertained her. He was sweet and kind. He did not fear to touch her.

For the remainder of their break, while they refreshed the horses and took time to rest, Derek and Magenta kept in one another's company near the water's edge. To Derek's way of thinking she was becoming more and more a perfect creature. He could not regard her unawed. She was so still and so beautiful.

Deacon and Cedrik were sitting near the horses, watching the other two in their exchanges. Deacon affected a manner of indifference that it was plain he did not feel.

"So you are to wander about aimlessly?" asked Cedrik, "with no thought or reason as to where you might go?"

"A course will present itself soon enough," Deacon replied.

"It's unlike you to choose the path of a vagabond, drifting without thought of consequences."

“What else am I to do? Return to the Imperial and be condemned to society I care nothing for? With the elves, what is there for me?”

“You have family waiting at both.”

Deacon sniffed with stubborn disinterest, looking down.

“Then you condemn yourself to loneliness?”

“That’s not my intention.”

“What is your intention?”

Deacon set his jaw and without looking up, said slowly, “You have two choices; you may follow me to wherever I happen to go, or you may return home. Do not question me further about what isn’t your concern.”

“You are my concern,” Cedrik said hotly.

The other two returned and ended the conversation. They packed up and were ready to leave. Cedrik assisted Magenta onto his horse. When she was settled in the saddle, he hauled himself up behind her. He grasped the reins, and with a swift kick they jolted off at a steady pace. The other two followed after.

They travelled in this fashion for several hours. Deacon rode in utter silence. His stomach held a twisting, grinding anger. He occasionally stole a glance at Cedrik’s hand round Magenta’s waist and would feel a swift pang of misery. After a time he could see that Cedrik, with the added burden of holding another person, was growing weary, though he would not mention it.

“The night will soon be closing in,” said Deacon, drawing rein and dismounting. “We can lie here tonight.”

Deacon and Magenta spoke not a word. After a time Cedrik said that he had seen a pretty little rock pool down in among the trees. She might like to go and bathe while they set up camp. This she did, grateful to be alone for a time. The water was slightly cool on her flesh, but it was a pleasure to stand

so quiet and to let the water come over her shoulders. To bathe in a pool was strange and primitive, but beautiful.

Derek lay unemployed while Deacon and Cedrik set up the tents. “She has been a while,” he said, restlessly. “Perhaps I should go check on her.”

“Perhaps you should get off your hide and help us,” said Cedrik.

Pressing his head back, Derek sighed, his mind still playing with pleasant and indulgent thoughts. His leg swayed back and forth. His hands were clasped on his stomach. “Ah, she’s like a princess. The way she moves —have you ever seen such unaffected regality? I’ll bet she takes good care of herself. All proper and ladylike.”

Cedrik said, “Make yourself useful and get a fire started.”

Derek rolled up onto his feet. Conversation led by him turned quickly again to the absent woman. Cedrik and Deacon suffered through his appraisal of her in silence. He spoke as if she were not of this world, not real to him, but as if she, a fragile, beautiful thing, was from a dream. Deacon worked without lifting his face. His hands moved with quick, jarring movements as he tied down and secured the tent. He found it difficult to disguise his annoyance.

“It will be sad to part with her,” said Derek. “Perhaps we can convince her to remain with us for a time longer.”

When Cedrik saw no effort was put forth to start a fire, he said, “Now would be better than later!”

“All right, I’m on it.” Quiet for several minutes while engaged in his task, Derek took great care to make a neat ring of rocks around some fire wood. When he was done, he stood clicking his fingers over it, indicating Deacon should set it alight. The latter rose slowly to his feet, dropping what he was doing, and with a look of derisive contempt, set the fire ablaze with flaring violence.

“Easy!” said Derek, leaning back and shielding his face. Presently the flame settled and was softly snapping. Derek sat down with a drink in his hand, content to talk about Magenta. Cedrik made several failed attempts to change the subject, noticing that Deacon became increasingly riled, but despite his best efforts he found it impossible to redirect the conversation. With an impatience amounting almost to anger, Deacon clenched his fist, an action that caused Derek to crush his pewter cup, the contents spilling over his pants. He started to his feet to avoid the spray of liquid.

“Curse it all! What is wrong with you?” he said, wiping the wetness from his trousers.

“You talk too much,” said Deacon. His head was bent forward, watching the pan he heated over the fire. He had just thrown tea into the boiling water.

“Why should I hide my regard?” said Derek, with sudden anger, instead of the indignant whine he would usually have favoured. He tossed the empty cup at his feet and went away from them. Deacon appeared undisturbed. He shook his head and set to preparing the evening meal.

The hissing of frying meat could be heard by Magenta as she returned. The brothers were not to be seen. Deacon was cooking something, crouching over the campfire. She saw that from behind he was very handsome, with a strong, broad back. The nape of his neck was tanned and smooth. She watched the firm setting of his shoulders move beneath his shirt as he leaned forward.

Derek came ducking out from his tent when he saw her just outside. “You’ve returned from the water looking very beautiful,” he said. She smiled and returned the brush and soap to Cedrik’s bag. She had pinned her hair so as not to get it wet. “Was it very cold?” he asked.

“Not very cold,” she answered.

He watched entranced as she removed the pins and let her hair fall free. “You’re chilled right through,” he said. “You should have waited till

morning. See, you're shivering. Don't deny it. Come sit by the fire. You'll be warm again."

They joined Deacon by the fire. "Am I able to help?" she asked him.

"Give me that plate," he said, lifting his hand and pointing. She did so, then became very quiet. He did not really want her help. Derek sat close to her, attentive. He was watching her indulgently, enjoying her.

"Women should always have their hair down."

At the comment Deacon glanced up briefly, then down again. His face looked heavy and impassive. He hung forward a little, staring at the sizzling pan. He never said a word. A certain resentment filled him. He was like a victim there.

Cedrik soon accompanied them. "Give me some of this; it looks good," he said, helping himself from the pan. "Got coffee?"

"Tea," answered Deacon.

Their time together round the fire was not chatty nor cosy, but silent. Deacon sat as a stranger among them. As night fell darker, the firelight played more and more strongly on his features, and the shadow upon him seemed to grow darker and heavier.

Derek stabbed at his food. "This is good," he said, trying to make small talk. He took careful mouthfuls; after his experience in Cheydon he had a distinct fear of anything remotely hot, and his cousin was known to have a heavy hand with spices in his cooking.

Deacon was the first to rise. Magenta noticed he scarcely seemed to eat. His face looked pale and peaked. "Will you have nothing more?" she asked.

"No. I'm going to bed." He sounded angry and tired.

When he was gone, Cedrik said to Magenta, "He's apt at making strangers of all the people he meets."

“Have you known him from boyhood?” she asked at length.

“Never for any extended period,” said Cedrik. “All his life he’s lived far from us.” He frowned, snapping a twig between his fingers, tossing it aside. “He is much changed.” He hesitated, then asked, “Has he told you his reasons for going to Terium?”

Magenta looked down. “No, he has said nothing to me.”

Alone in his bed, Deacon went to sleep feeling a greater emptiness than hunger.

Wrath, vengeance, hatred, cannot breathe in the same atmosphere as love, and so it was that love began to wither and withdraw, not without bitter consequences and painful conflicts. Deacon had made himself insensitive toward her, but it was damaging to his own health. It affected him, yet still he persisted. She wanted to protect him from pain and hurt, but her presence seemed to cause him more distress. Though it was difficult, she understood that whatever trouble and heartache he suffered, he wanted to be left to himself, and so she remained apart. She did not, however, love him the less for having to love at a more conscious distance. In her heart she remained constant to him.

After dinner one night, Deacon stationed himself under a tree somewhat apart from the others. His relentlessly agitated mind was labouring with heavy thoughts as he struggled to maintain the necessary courage to take a life, acutely struggling with his own soul. Magenta watched him in his loneliness. It was difficult to keep silent when silence was so painful.

The result of too many haunted nights was beginning to show upon his features. Briefly he turned his face toward her. That glance had revealed a desperate appeal, but he in the same instance compelled his countenance to resume its former expression of detached indifference. He was very much estranged. Magenta sat irresolute for some time, then arose and went quietly away. The cold separation between them was cruel.

“Look at the stubborn devil,” said Derek suddenly, as if it had been on his mind all the while. Cedrik glanced up to see his attention was burning

on Deacon. “One of us must say something.”

“No, leave him to himself,” Cedrik said with a measure of sternness. “It will only bring harm.”

Derek made an abrupt sound and poked the ground with a stick. They spoke no more but were too comfortable with one another for the silence to be awkward. Derek watched Magenta with increasing sensitivity. He thought her love the truest kind, where all is given in exchange for nothing. It pained him to see her suffer. She was as if dying for the love of him, for she was daily growing more and more faint.

In the manner of a man who has nerved himself up to the assertion of a difficult task, Derek approached Deacon. He tried to appear casual, speaking of whatever came to mind. Deacon frowned at the mumbled trivialities. “Are you talking in your sleep? What are you trying to say to me?”

“You look like you’ve been kicked by a horse.”

Deacon smiled, not without some resentment. “Is that what you came to tell me?”

Derek became serious and resting his brow against the rough bark, looked down at his cousin. “The dullest can see you love her.” Deacon’s countenance darkened instantly. “You do, do you not?” The expression on his face Derek took at once as guilt. He said excitedly, “Then love her, man. For pity’s sake, can you not see how she suffers? How is she to know you hold affection for her, if you remain cynically observant from the shadows?”

“The day I take advice from you in matters of the heart is the day I hang myself.”

“She needs you,” said Derek with greater emphasis. “If I, of all people, can see it, how can you alone be blind to it?”

Deacon rose to leave, saying in a tone intended to quench conversation, “She would not be happy to find you discussing such things with me.” As he turned, his eyes encountered those of the young woman who was the subject of their meeting. She was sitting beside Cedrik, and he was saying something to which she was listening with only partial attention. For a moment the eyes of both were locked; then each turned from the other, Magenta with disappointment, Deacon with vexation.

Deacon began to make his way further from camp, but his antagonist persisted at his shoulder. Derek’s persistent encouragements harassed him almost intolerably. Both came to an abrupt stop when he at last said, “What do you want from me? It is her failing to harbour fascination for me.”

“She loves you!” said Derek. “And I would be greatly mistaken if you have not given her reason. More than friendly, I should say.”

“You’re going a step too far.” His chest was hot in an anguish of suppression.

“Damn it, why do you have to be so callous with her?” Deacon looked away into the night, swallowing his bitterness. Derek waited several moments before venturing to speak further. “Don’t sit in the shadows brooding. She’s afraid to go near you.”

Deacon shook his head wearily. “She does not fear me.”

“She does; any fool can see it! She’s terrified of you, and not a person in this world would blame her. You’ve been as black as death. Why are you so disturbed? She is a prize. She is worth striving for, and yet you would treat her as the plague and bless the stars at getting rid of her. She doesn’t understand.”

Derek went on in this accusing tone, exasperated to the point of desperation. The other remained sullenly silent. The personal offences to himself he let pass, but when Derek persisted on her languishment he began to grow hot.

“Don’t presume to understand her after a few mere days of play,” he said bitterly.

Contempt arose in Derek. “She has confided in me more these past days than she has you.”

Deacon turned and took hold of him violently. The change in his manner was very sudden. “Speak not another word to me, or we shall cross one another again.” He had been struggling with himself all this while.

“I had hoped,” said Derek, “you would go to her and speak your heart freely. Now I pray you stay far from her.”

Deacon’s face paled visibly. He released Derek with a rough push, muttering something about being a fool. He turned and began to walk.

“I’m not such a fool to be blind to her!” cried Derek with an outburst of accumulated spite. When left alone he winced with confusion and pain. Instead of awakening tender impulses in Deacon, he seemed only to succeed in rousing anger and jealousy.

“I told you to let it alone,” said his brother, when he returned.

Chapter 35
Tanglewood

The night was clear, the moon full. Magenta and the brothers stood about the fire. Derek was about to show them something. Deacon sat by himself, lost in the labyrinth of his own mind, when he glimpsed that Derek was fiddling with a pouch of sorts. He started to his feet to investigate.

Cedrik cautioned his brother, “Don’t play with such things.”

Derek announced that he was going to do it.

“What is it supposed to achieve?” asked Cedrik, but he found out ere Deacon could reach them. Derek tossed a handful of the powder into the fire and with an explosive burst, dragons of fire writhed out from the flame, hot and eel-like, blazing up into the night sky, like fireworks gone wrong, lashing Derek with a nasty lick of flame. With a shriek he stumbled backwards and fell. Closer to Magenta, Cedrik huddled round her and covered her with himself, so she was shielded like a nut within its shell. The fire quickly became subdued, the fiery dragons dying out in the blackness of the sky.

Cedrik uncurled reluctantly from Magenta, looking upward. Derek returned to his seat, nursing a burnt hand. The others gathered round him to find what damage had been inflicted. Deacon held off for a few moments before he did anything, just to let him suffer a little. Presently, he knelt to one knee before Derek and placed his hand over the injured one. His touch felt like ice, and for a moment the ache of cold was worse than the burn, but it soon subsided and left the skin cool and numb.

“What did you expect it to do?” asked Cedrik crossly, looking down at his brother while Deacon attended him.

“It was supposed to reveal future happenings,” Derek said in an injured tone.

Deacon looked up at him from under eyelids heavy with satire and bound the injured hand with brutal roughness. “Perhaps in the future you will learn to use that dormant organ hidden in your head,” he said, reproachful.

Derek drew a sharp breath between his teeth. “Easy, easy,” he said, frowning and cursing under his breath.

Cedrik watched, stoney-faced. “Pride of the Imperial legion,” he muttered.

“Where did you get it, in any case?” asked Deacon, rising to his feet, task completed.

“Won it,” answered Derek.

“Won it where?”

“In that underground place. Some fellow lost a bet, he couldn’t pay me, so he gave me this powder and said if I throw it in the fire my future would be revealed.”

Deacon raised his brows. About his mouth were subtle lines of derisive amusement.

“And how is it looking for you?” asked Cedrik, taking a place by the fire alongside Deacon, who had gravitated to his book, rendering himself deathly dull. Derek muttered a curse and sat quiet. Magenta came to his side, and he was content to turn to her for sympathy after the rough handling he had received from his more coarse companions.

“I’m suffering a little here,” he said to her, then reached into a bag. “Fortunately Cade left us a parting gift.” He tapped the bottle. He downed several mugs in quick succession, and it proved a potent restorative, under the influence of which Derek was happy to be the centre of attention. Cedrik threw him a few cautionary glances as if to warn him to tone it down, but Derek shrugged them off.

“He prefers the society of old ladies. He would rather be knitting,” said Derek in a loud whisper. “And this one!” Deacon raised his eyes at the rude address with a none-too-friendly expression. “Always with his nose in those books. I don’t even think he can read.”

Derek noticed that Magenta’s spirits had paled and, in an attempt to recapture the previous lightheartedness, poured her a drink and offered it in a manner she was unable to refuse. “Drink!” he ordered when she did not place it to her lips even. “No one shall be gloomy in my presence!” He wiped his chin on the sleeve of his shirt. He talked all the time with unflagging zest. “Drink!” he said.

“Are you always this cheerful after an injury, Derek?” she asked.

“Always!”

Cedrik said, “And I suppose the ale in your belly can account for none of this merriment?”

“That’s why I always drink after an injury,” he said. Then he complained to Magenta. “You’re not drinking!”

On impulse he stood, and taking her suddenly by the hand, dragged her to her feet. He led her away from the camp so they might see the stars more clearly. The sky was a garden of diamonds. Most of what Derek said didn’t make any sense, showing her the different constellations and sprouting ridiculous theories.

“You are fortunate to have such a love of the stars,” she said.

The young man’s voice grew tender as he leaned nearer. “I am.” She had a momentary sense of unease at his nearness, when he suddenly burst out in a tone full of his former merriment. “I say, take life as it is, full of beauty, full of adventure! Why shouldn’t we enjoy it? Why should we take it any other way! Too much is wasted on reserve and fear and resentment and whatever else keeps us from what we want!”

When he finally paused to steal a breath he looked at Magenta. She was lovely in the soft light. She was a strange, wonderful creature to him, so separate and beyond him. The clouds drifted free and unveiled the moon's pale beauty. He looked up. "Ah, look how beautiful it is; look!" He lowered his eyes to make certain she was looking. She was. Her face tilted upward, exquisitely showed the delicate line of her jaw down to the pale exposure of her throat. "Isn't that beautiful?" he said with enthusiasm.

"It is." Her eyes came down to look at him; he was still gazing upward in wonder, his head tilted so far back it looked as if he might lose his balance. To herself she smiled, yet with heartache. Derek was sweet company, but in spirit she was quite alone. She shifted her gaze over to Deacon. He had moved away from the fire and was sitting among the trees. She could not see his features among the shadows but saw the vague form of him. She looked toward him with dull longing.

"I think you will find the romance one-sided," came Derek's voice, verging on scorn. She turned to him and found his eyes upon her. He suddenly grew sober, coming closer. "But he's not the only man worth having, is he?"

His hopeful words touched her with pity. "Derek …" She sought to find words to discourage him, when he flushed and suddenly turned from her. His back and shoulders stiffened with injured stubbornness.

"He was going to leave you," he said. "If not for my brother you would not be here."

This she already knew, but to hear it from another was a bitter pain to her.

"He's a thoughtless, cold-hearted …" Derek paused, his mouth working with hurt anger, his brows crossed heavily in a frown. "He cares nothing for anyone, gives no thought to others' pain. He knows of nothing but his own suffering. I hope one day he wakes to find what a black-blood he truly is."

Magenta became aware that the greater hurt came from his disconnection with his cousin, not the sting of her refusal. "When he spoke

of you, he spoke with greater kindness," she said, with gentle remonstrance.

A sob seemed as if it struggled in his throat. "I don't understand him," he said with desperate anger. "We risked our lives to save his, and yet he would act as if he despises us!"

Magenta felt a sensation in her own throat that made it difficult to speak. "Sometimes when we hurt so terribly, we cannot help but hurt those nearest our heart."

"He has always been like this, always. Devoted only to himself, to his own interests and benefit, regardless of others."

While Derek persisted in his lament, her gaze went momentarily to Deacon. Half the night he had remained there in the darkness. She remained quietly talking with Derek, but her thoughts were always on him. When she looked again she saw that he had fallen asleep against the tree. His head lolled forward.

When Derek gathered himself together and bade her goodnight, Magenta went to Deacon. He sat motionless in the same position as before, only his head was back. Slowly, she came down to his level. His eyelids were lowered, his mouth slightly open. She felt a pang of pity and tenderness. She wanted to kiss him as he lay there so soft and vulnerable, abandoned in the half-death of sleep. Adoring him with loving eyes, she watched while he slept. Before drawing away she leaned over him and put her lips to his cheek, so softly he never knew.

Days passed without account. They soon came to a thriving wood. The vegetation here was overgrown, choked with overbearing plants, rivals among themselves, one plant slowly choking another in a witless attempt at supremacy. Creepers, swollen with venom, wrapped so tightly round their victims that even the trees were strangled, straining under the massive weight of entrenched vines.

The travellers thought it best to dismount and proceed on foot through the twining and thickening mass. In some parts it was impenetrably dense. There was little sign of animal life. Plant life stirred within the shadowy,

concealed parts. Not all the plants were objectionable to the eyes. Some had pretty flowering foliage, some bright berries.

Magenta recognized some of the plants for what they were and was cautious about the others. It was daytime but was quite dark, due to the overhanging trees, and it was difficult to move without catching a branch in the face. Cedrik drew his sword to cut away some of the vegetation that bothered him.

“Do not provoke them,” she said, touching his shoulder. He lowered his arm and sheathed his sword in a wary manner. “Please be very quiet,” she said to her companions. She saw that they had come upon an area infested with a particular plant armed with a paralytic substance, so it could devour its victims without struggle, feeding on the blood, drawing it from the tissue.

She turned from Cedrik and caught her breath as a startled scream came suddenly to her throat. Near her face was the face of another in among the trees. Damp earth and rotting vegetation grew over its lifeless countenance. Insects crawled over it with appalling disregard, so that the features were barely recognizable as human. The body itself had started to become a part of the plant, partially decayed, partially digested. Magenta shut her eyes to escape the sight of it.

“We need to move from here swiftly,” said Cedrik quietly, urging her away from the horror of it.

They had gone perhaps half the distance without encountering misfortune, when a sharp branch caught Derek in the face. He drew a sharp breath and closed his hand over the strip of blood on his neck, a gesture which made all of them turn to look at him. As if trying to clear his vision he shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said but had not taken more than a few steps, when he suddenly teetered and pitched forward into the ground. He did not feel the pain when he hit. A form of paralysis began to seize his limbs, quickly.

Snaking out of the vegetation, invasive and sly, came a mass of these creepers. With his drawn blade Cedrik wasted not an instant to come to

Derek’s aid, but on his way his foot was snared and he was flung to the ground. He rolled to his back, slashing and cutting at his foe. The horses jolted and ran off with fright, leaving their owners to their fate. Magenta too was seized, creeping-vines twining up her thighs and up around her body.

Deacon, as yet untouched, stood back. His hands broke into flame, and with a flare of extraordinary fire, he set alight any creeping thing to come near him. There seemed to be an anguished cry that rang from their tortured forms. The blackened boughs, utterly wounded, withdrew and suddenly stilled.

Magenta became suffocatingly entwined, the vines trying to drag her down, twisting restrictively about her limbs and her throat even. She was highly resistant to their effects, but not they to hers. They clung tightly but were becoming brittle and were dying.

“Do not burn them!” she cried to Deacon. Her desperation was not for any love of the plants but because she knew that the harmful substances could also be inhaled if the poisonous boughs were burned. Deacon heeded her cry and swiftly quenched the flames. He saw her entangled and with sudden urgency made his way to her. A plant whipped across his face and left a thin line of blood high on his cheek, just below the eye. Before he reached her even, he tore them from her with a single forcible effort. They were already dying from her touch and shrivelled and curled upon the ground.

Afflicted with the loss of voluntary movements, Derek lay helpless. He did not so much as twitch and had grown as stiff as a frigid corpse. His eyes were fixed wide; he had not use of his lids. The only sign that he still lived was the lacrimation—secretion of tears—that trickled down his cheek, a reaction to the chemical in the sap. Something was at work about his legs. Feelers were winding their way up around his body, gnarled things trying to devour him whole.

Lying not far from him, Cedrik fought vigorously, his foe still entangling his legs. He chopped it to bits, slashing its outgrowth that seeped with his blood. When he was freed he rolled to his stomach and scrambled over to Derek. He hacked back the feelers and with frantic haste tore open

the front of his brother's shirt. Distended blue veins appeared on Derek's neck and went down his chest. His lips had the paleness of death. Cedrik was frantic at the sight.

"Deacon!" he cried wildly, putting his head down to hear a heartbeat. In an instant his cousin was at his side. He turned to Deacon in despair. "Can you help him?" he asked tightly.

Deacon shook his head, unable to speak. He swallowed his fear and forced himself to remain calm. His mind worked frantically. He became conscious of Magenta at his side. In her hand she held a vial of liquid, to which she had added some sap of the poisonous plant, the very same as had attacked Derek. Magenta shook the vial. The two substances mingled, and an imperceivable reaction took place. As she did this, Cedrik watched with apprehension. "What's she doing?" he said to Deacon, then to Magenta, "What are you doing?"

Deacon prevented him from reaching out and taking the vial from her hand. "Let her," he said gently. Only when Cedrik had nodded his consent did Magenta proceed to administer the stimulant and force the body into expelling the poison.

"What do you give him?" Cedrik asked, as she held the vial to Derek's lips, but the slight revival of his brother arrested his attention. She administered to Derek several times. He lay in a cold sweat, periodically suffering violent, involuntary muscle contractions.

Magenta bent over him and put her mouth close to his ear. "I know you can hear me, Derek," she said firmly. "The poison will leave your body in time." As she spoke, a single determined vine began to work secretly about his ankle and made its way up his limb. Magenta caught it in her grasp as if it were a snake and tore it loose.

It lashed and stung her hand, wrapping itself round and round her wrist. She gripped it tighter to make it shrivel and let go. It released, but not before leaving a red, stinging mark round her hand and wrist where it had lashed. Deacon gave her a look of feeling, sorry she had been harmed.

“Derek, can you hear me?” asked Cedrik. He could barely contain his anxiety. Derek lay in a frightful state, his body afflicted with uncontrolled twitching and sudden spasms. He was sweating profusely, the potent substance reacting within him. Although he was immobile and incapable of any kind of communication, an involuntary secretion of tears streamed down his face. His lack of responsiveness had Cedrik in a panic. “What is happening?” he cried, restrained in his cousin’s arms.

“His body is expelling the toxicant,” Magenta explained with a taut calmness, affording little comfort to those observing. Slowly, by degrees, Derek began to recover, his body calmer. Inarticulate sounds issued from his lips. Soon his glassy eyes blinked and returned to life. His eyelids closed, and he began to stir with movements of his own accord, tossing his head in mild distress. When his eyes reopened, he rolled to his side and with childlike desperation clutched Magenta, straining his face against the softness of her stomach, his arms about her waist. His muscles quivered uncontrollably. A teary relief swept over Cedrik, and he at once sought Derek, his hands groping as if he had lost him. Transferring from Magenta to his brother, Derek went weakly to Cedrik, and the two clasped each other, locked in a vice-like embrace. They remained embraced silently for long minutes. Derek convulsed periodically in his brother’s arms.

After Deacon fetched the horses, they moved on to find a safe resting place. That evening Derek slept observed. Magenta sat next to him, watching over him. Though he didn’t want it, she made him drink a considerable amount of water. He was dehydrated and exhausted.

When she was content that he was sound and peaceful, Magenta closed her eyes and became deeply calm. In this relaxed condition she entered a state where the deep unconscious mind was invoked for superior and faster healing. She reopened her eyes when Cedrik appeared quietly at her side. He said softly, so as not to wake Derek, “Are you very much hurt?”

She shook her head, her attention still on the young one. It was then Cedrik noticed she bore not the slightest mark of the day’s struggles.

“You have healed your injuries,” he said, relieved and curious. “Are you able to heal his?”

She shook her head with apology. “I cannot heal others, only myself.”

“It’s all right; I’m made of steel,” mumbled Derek. “This time I really do feel as if you took to me with a stick.” He had only just struggled to sit up and Magenta held a cup of water to him. He groaned and took it begrudgingly. “I think I would rather have the poison.” He wiped water from his chin with his sleeve. Still weak, he sank easily back into sleep.

“It is good of you to watch him,” said Cedrik. He ducked out of the tent and sat before the fire alongside Deacon, who looked up with concern, subdued.

“Is he all right?”

“He’s all right.”

Deacon stared into the flame with a haunted, set expression. His voice came unexpectedly with strained emotion. “When my mother was dying, she had that same look in her eyes, that same fear.” Cedrik dared not interrupt. For a minute Deacon was utterly silent. Then he confessed: “I go to Terium. There is something there that I need.” At what point he decided it was best to keep Cedrik at his side, Deacon didn’t know, but he thought now it was best Cedrik not return home just yet. If word got to Éomus that he had discovered Terium, Éomus might try to prevent him. He said, “You may come with me, if it is still your wish.”

Cedrik was disappointed more information was not volunteered but said, “Do you want us to come with you?”

Deacon hesitated, then nodded slowly, his lips compressed. “Don’t ask me questions but understand it is what I need.” His jaw worked tightly. “It’s not something easy to attain.”

“Is this why you didn’t want us to come?” asked Cedrik. “Why you don’t want her to?”

The look he received convinced him he was pretty near to the truth. Deacon turned his eyes back to the fire. He stared with such unblinking

intensity, Cedrik thought the tears he could see glistening there would gather and fall, but they dissolved and were not released.

Chapter 36
An Observable Change

Man is intrinsically drawn to truth. In the absence of inner truthfulness, ignoring the inner voice and living a lie, the nature of his being will suffer the restlessness and discontent of the ceaseless voice telling him he is wrong.

Deacon was vividly conscious of his dark purpose. It bled him of his vitality and self-respect. The complexion that had previously been burned brown by the sun had lost its bronze and by degrees grown pale. His form was still impressive, but it looked defeated now, his shoulders bowed, his face downcast.

He seemed to lack the essential consciousness of well-being, denying himself comfort and sustenance and, of all things necessary to the human form, companionship. He became drawn inward. Even Magenta could not understand the mystery in which he shrouded himself. He seemed striving to be sufficient unto himself, not wanting to be in need of any living creature.

His abject state left his companions wondering what illness had taken him. Though it was evident his sufferings were self-inflicted, he alone was in possession of the cause. Magenta saw with deep concern that his countenance was losing its warmth and that the spirit in his eye was failing. He seemed in a kind of living death. The body corresponds with the spirit, and his body was suffering accordingly.

Deacon moved away from the warmth of the campfire and sat with his back against a tree, among the night’s shadows, which seemed to clasp him too closely and too far away from her. Magenta had prepared him something to eat, but he scarcely touched it. She watched him with growing distress. There were violent alterations in his character. To her it seemed he had taken on another consciousness, another self; he was not who he had

been when she had him to herself in the woods. His spirit had fused with the hate that churned in a slow, ever-burning furnace.

“Tell me, Cedrik,” she said, subdued, “can your own heart deceive you?”

“Can my heart lie to me?” he said, lightly. “I’m certain it does.” Observing her downcast features he grew serious. “The thing about the heart,” he began tentatively, “is that it has a necessity for hope. Sometimes it’s difficult to discern between it and truth.” He saw that she struggled with emotion and said nothing more.

When Magenta saw that Deacon had finished eating, she went to him. He had been deeply engrossed in his thoughts for some time when he became aware of her. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked up at her. She reached out for the plate; with a tight smile he handed it to her, muttering his gratitude. She stood over him as if she would be fixed there forever; he was tense under the agony of it. Soon she crouched down near to him. “Do you suffer illness?” she asked. Her low, sweet voice, her touch upon his arm, brought back emotions he had hoped had left him.

“There are better things you can achieve with your time, than to concern yourself with me.” He could not keep the bitterness from creeping into his voice. He paid no more attention to her presence. She drew away. He sat without a sense of feeling.

It seemed he had lost complete interest in her existence, and as if her existence required his belief in it, she began to fade. A melancholy swept over her and seemed to extinguish the life in her. There was a calm, unearthly beauty in her sorrow. Her deep eyes gave the impression of looking beyond rather than into those of their beholders. In this state she held a quiet, complacent sense of forbearance, belonging to her love for him.

One evening Magenta stood away from camp beneath the open sky spread with stars. She looked into the night with a vague, distant look, a wistful and gentle acquiescence to her fate. At a near distance Deacon perceived her there. He stood with his shoulder against a small tree,

watching her with strange intentness. She was lovely in the tender light. Every movement woke greater sentiment in him. All the while he grew more sullen and unbearable to himself. The terrible softness of her, he longed for.

The fire was put out and the companions settled into their beds for the night. In his lonely isolation, Deacon lay awake, wishing he was lying beside her with the warm darkness folding them close. His body ached with physical longing, and his heart with something of greater depth.

In her bed, Magenta heard a light step pass the tent. She arose and upon venturing out, saw that Deacon wandered away from camp and vanished in among the trees. She returned to her blankets but was stirred into wakefulness, too alive to consider sleep. She at last flipped back the covers and ventured into the cold night, wearing only her light sleeping shift.

The moon afforded scarcely enough light for her to make her way through the black mass of trees. She soon came to find him in a small clearing—a lonely silhouette standing by a dark pool of water. From her angle she could not see his face, more than the strong line of his jaw. But she could discern from his bowed head that his attention was fully fixed upon the precious jewel he held out from its chain round his neck. It was like none other she had ever seen, with a luminous quality that to her seemed most certainly of elven make.

For a moment she watched him, her presence hidden by the darkness of the night. As she drew nearer he heard her approaching steps and casually, but swiftly, returned the jewel to its place beneath his shirt. Crouching down by the pool, he splashed cool water over his face in an attempt to remove any sign of grief. Drying his face on the sleeve of his shirt, he glanced briefly over his shoulder.

“You cannot sleep,” he said, rising to his feet, keeping his face partly averted. He knew affliction was still too apparent on his features. She hadn’t a chance to respond, when the eyes of both caught the back of something slippery and eel-like surfacing briefly from the water. Deacon grimaced at the thought of the tainted water having touched his face and spat out the taste he imagined was in his mouth. A faint smile lifted one

side of his mouth as he stole a quick glance at her, saying in a lighter, more playful tone, “We shall avoid the water tonight, I think.”

She smiled bleakly at the manner by which he sought to put her at ease, though he was not at ease himself and failed miserably to do so for her. But still, something akin to hope rose within her at his sudden warming toward her. Unfortunately he could not, it seemed, sustain the lightness of manner which he so sought, for he all too quickly sank back to his former state of misery.

His eyes fell once more to the still, black water. Magenta joined him in this silent absorption, occasionally glancing over to observe his features. His bitterness, while still apparent, was overshadowed by a heavy weariness, which in turn made her heart very heavy for him.

“You are weary,” she said, softly. At the sound of her voice his eyes returned from vacancy but nevertheless stayed fastened on the water. She turned to face him, wondering what the source of this self-imposed deprivation was. “Why must you punish yourself so cruelly?”

She was not certain, at first, that he would respond. He was still greatly detached from her, his face so ashen as to suggest death. But within him, somewhere, there was something much alive, despite his look of illness. “Our existence is brief,” he said at length. “We must push ourselves if we would achieve great heights.” He turned his eyes full upon her and said quietly, but with great intensity, “I do not wish to fall among the wretched and forgotten.”

She could see now that he belonged to his destination, willing to sacrifice all to get there. “That will not be your fate.” She looked at him in a manner as to suggest wonder and awe. Dropping his chin to his chest, he smiled, a grim smile of self-scorn.

“There are many things in this world that appear fascinating and inexplicit, but on closer inspection turn out to be merely commonplace,” he said, so cynically she knew at once he spoke of himself and her idea of him.

“And I have no doubt you are not one of them,” she said quickly. “You are greater than you know. There is more in your one sentence than in a thousand utterings of most, and you continue to perfect your mind. But you mustn’t neglect the present life for the future life. We must take time for the beauty that lies between us and our goal. If not—we may miss the many wonderful things along the way.”

He could not doubt the meaning of the last of what had she said, and staring in her wonderful dark eyes, the strong feeling of affection for her came over him, battling against the weariness and pain. He wanted so much to rest in the warmth of her love. She was so strong in her self-possession, and she was so determined to think well of him, believing so assuredly that she should belong to him. He always proved wanting, always failing to deny the sudden onset of this love that had so rapidly taken full possession of him. He knew discovering the intricacies of her character would be a lifelong endeavour, one he would gladly embrace, if he did not feel with certainty that she was made of a finer material than himself and deserved infinitely more than he could deliver. So he turned from all tender thoughts, once again turning himself inward and away from her, though he knew her heart was breaking at his absence.

A heavy silence befell them. Her attention was drawn to his chest, where he absent-mindedly had laid his open palm. She knew there were other things that worked on his troubled mind.

“Do you care very much for her?” Magenta asked at length. He saw her eyes fall to where the jewel lay hidden near his heart. Drawing it out he nodded solemnly.

“Very much.”

Her hopes suddenly shrank and sank down. So lost in thought it seemed he was unaware of his surroundings, Deacon fondled the jewel between his fingers, and she saw a kind of pained tenderness cross his features. She smiled a faint painful smile, as if he had unwittingly hurt her. She felt cast aside. It was difficult to draw breath.

“It was to be my mother’s.” A frown creased his brow and the strong muscle in his jaw tightened. “But she died before I gave it to her.”

The tumult of emotion struck Magenta mute, then scarcely above a whisper, she uttered, “It is beautiful.”

“I’m certain the elves would find it less that faultless,” he said, snatching it up and tucking it back into its place with a look that alerted her that he had most likely crafted the jewel himself.

“You made this?” she asked in marvelment, gently laying her fingertips upon his chest, as though she were touching the precious jewel itself. The gesture made his entire frame shudder.

“The evenings are growing cold,” he said, as if desiring to turn the conversation to a more general one.

“Tell me about her,” Magenta pursued gently. “Your mother. What was she like?”

Deacon recalled her memory with a faint, tender smile. “True-hearted. Kind. The sort of woman any honorable man would lay his life down for.”

It was a while before Magenta ventured to ask more. “And your father?” she asked cautiously, not wishing to push him further than he was willing.

Deacon compressed his lips tightly, resting his chin on his chest, which was habitual of him when distressed. “What can be said of a man who pledges himself to a woman, then through no fault of her own, abandons her and his child?” he said bitterly.

Staying very quiet, Magenta waited in vain for him to say more. His mind was full of bitter memories, his face pale and impassive. He sneered inwardly at the disgrace of his father’s course and could not escape the sense of his own insufficiencies.

“Any good there is in me I got from her.” His words came out nothing more than a quiet murmur.

“There is a great deal of good in you,” said Magenta. He was so intensely aware of her nearness that there was no surprise in her gentle touch upon his arm.

“How can you be so certain?” he asked, glancing at her darkly. She looked into his eyes, and it seemed she could see into a soul deeper than that of any human.

“Most make the mistake of believing the eyes to be merely an organ of sight, part of our form,” she said. “But they are so much more. They allow insight into one’s soul, and yours is one of true benevolence.”

Though he felt unworthy of such regard, her words somehow comforted and sustained him. He turned fully to face her, his gaze falling to her slender form that was visible beneath her light shift. The touch of his hand brushing down the length of her bare arm gave her unutterable pleasure, made all the greater by contrast with his former indifference. Far from blushing or even averting her eyes, she leaned nearer to him. She had a deep longing for him to embrace her.

Arrested with love and pure adoration, he moved nearer her. “You cannot know what good you have done me tonight,” he said in a voice pitched to a lower tone and with a softer note. Every sharp angle of his handsome face had softened to the sincerest tenderness, and he had drawn so near she could feel the warmth of his breath upon her cheek. For the moment it seemed as if he might kiss her, but he stood frozen within himself, as if standing at some closed door unable to enter. He turned his face aside, but did not withdraw.

For some time he was torn pitilessly in this conflict, when he felt the warmth of her hand at the nape of his neck, drawing him down, and her lips tenderly pressed to his. Submissively he closed his eyes, adrift in her kiss, and felt a complete breakdown of his resolve. He had avoided her touch for so long, now that he had allowed it he could not, it seemed, get enough. Having utterly lost his self-command, he let his arm steal round her, and with the ardour of passion drew her into him, kissing her with all the fervor of one long denied.

Holding her thoroughly embraced, he seemed to lift her nearer to himself, closer and closer, his heart crushed in a passionate grip. As though obeying some sudden impulse he lifted her upon the smooth rock behind her. His lips and caresses increased in their demand until it appeared he might consume her. Though he could not doubt her willingness, he, with a great effort of will, smothered and subdued his passion.

Clinging still, he could not yet force himself to let go. The fever-hot face that rested upon her own was restless, and with an effort painful to see, he released her. “There is nothing to be said in my defence,” he breathed apologetically, drawing back from her entirely. He knew if he stood there longer he must yield.

Presently she came to stand before him. His face was taut, the pulse in his throat the only indication of what he might be feeling, his breath coming in great heaves. Gently she took his arm and drew it round her waist, pressing against him, and he felt what little command he had on his senses slipping away.

“Magenta …” His tone was desperate, pleading. He looked so distressed that she took pity on him and drew back a little. Turning half from her, his body grew very still. His eyes were downcast. It was evident a severe conflict was going on in his mind. She stroked his hair and he accepted her touch, but passively, without responsive warmth.

“You seem so alone in the world,” she said caressively. Deacon appeared to cringe inwardly. For him, her kindness was full of cruelty, her gentle touch causing suffering even as it promised to ease it. Magenta tried to urge him to soften to her, only to meet a refusal, stubborn and sorrowful.

Finally he said, in his usual dispassionate tones, “The way you looked at me, I thought you had seen into my soul, but I perceive now that you have not, or you would not wish to be so near me. You might as well love a shadow as me.” He glanced at her darkly.

There in his eyes she saw a reason for his refusal that was not unfavourable to her. There was a darkness in him. She could not be deceived, even by her love. It distressed her keenly that he should harbour a

purpose that disturbed his conscience and kept him from her, yet he would not abandon it. She clasped the hand that hung by his side, but he left it hanging lifeless, without returning pressure.

“What keeps you from me?” she asked, with her eyes fastened on his face, as was her instinctive custom when she sought to discover more than his words would reveal. But he closed his eyes on the answer she sought.

He soon relapsed into dismal silence. She held his hand as though it were the very object to keep him bound to her forever, but he would not soften, struggling with the utter impossibility of unburdening himself to her. He could feel her gaze heavily on him. He would glance at her, but she could not hold his eyes. They fell beneath hers each time. For an instant it appeared as if he might confide the insupportable grief he was utterly weary of holding onto, but he said nothing and averted his face further.

“I wish you would speak the words that lie on your lips,” she said, brushing a strand of black hair from his eyes. She seemed to press so heavily upon him, he felt she was suffocating him. “Have you nothing to say?” she asked despairingly. Both his heart and his eyes were closed to her. He shook his head, clearly unable to say what was in his heart. Her lashes dropped to her delicate cheek. Deacon felt her disappointment and groaned inwardly with annoyance and exasperation.

“Why must you press me to uncover every detail of my character?” he said. “I feel as though, by the foolishness of some impulse, I have found myself in a cage with you.”

Magenta instantly grew pale, whether with hurt or anger he could not tell. She felt as though a shard of poisoned ice had pierced her breast. The words immediately burned his tongue, and he regretted having said them. He quickly tried to recover but she would hear none of it.

As she turned to leave, he took a step so as to bar her way. She spoke in hurt but even tones. “I leave at your bidding; why do you prevent me?” She looked almost ill, but he saw the indomitable spirit looking out from her clear-seeing eyes. Gradually a heavy frown contracted his brow.

“Keep your heart until you find someone worthy to receive it.”

“A woman’s heart does not belong to her but to the one who wrenches it from her, and as it happens, he is often the one who does not wish to keep it.” As she brushed past him, his eyes involuntarily closed, and he felt a hollowing pain, as though she had taken part of his soul with her. He subdued the urge to clutch her and force her to stay. Feeling shattered and destroyed, he sat down by the water. His usually concentrated eyes had become as vacant and blind as the eyes of a man who is dead.

Chapter 37
Sandrine

The afternoon sun diminished behind green hills. Resting in a lush valley spread before them was the charming city of Sandrine. Along the road they came upon a wayside inn. It was a pleasant, homely place with comfortable old tables and chairs and a large barrel of spiced wine in the corner. A pleasant, demure woman, came up from the cellar to greet them. “May I offer you an evening meal or a bed? I have only two rooms available, but they are both lovely and very comfortable. I’m certain they will be to your satisfaction.”

Cedrik said, “We’ll have the two rooms and something hot to eat.”

The three young men took one room. Magenta had the other to herself. Before settling in for the evening, they sat in the commonroom in the warm glow of the fire, awaiting their hostess. The woman returned with a jug filled with spiced wine and a tray with hot bread. Setting them down, she then darted off to retrieve the rest of their supper. She smiled and apologized, as she slipped past another customer.

“This seems one of the few places where everything and everyone is friendly,” said Cedrik, waiting while Magenta was cutting a slice of bread for him.

“Yes, it’s nice,” said Derek between sips of wine; “it’s away from everything, though. Only farms and streams and trees.”

Cedrik rubbed his nose and looked down. He did not want to tempt her away from her decision, or interfere with what was not his business. Next to him Deacon was silent with submission, like fate.

A pleasant quiet was in the room as they dined. The gentle conversation rarely lifted beyond a murmur. Derek took his last mouthful and stretched comfortably in his chair. Looking at Magenta he leaned forward on the

table. “It’s not too late to change your mind,” he said, “if you want to return to the Imperial with us. I have a sister you would adore.”

“It is a good thing to think about,” said Cedrik.

At the suggestion of her leaving with them, Deacon blinked but did not raise his face. He waited for her answer.

“I am grateful you have been so kind, but I will find my own way. Here shall be the place to start.” Her tone was indisputable, and rising to avoid further discussion, she bade them a farewell. Cedrik rose quickly to his feet, and reaching over the table, offered her his hand.

“We will bid you a proper farewell when we rise in the morning,” he said. She placed her hand in his, and he brought it to his lips, with the gentleness and reverence in which he knew he would always hold her. Taking his brother’s lead, Derek rose and did likewise. Half overcome, Magenta was unable to speak, and inclined her head graciously. Drawing away, she removed herself and swept up the wooden stairs.

Without looking after her Deacon raised the wine to his lips but placed it down again untasted.

The young men soon retired to their own room. It was cosy and smelled of fresh linen, with a double and single bed. The brothers shared the double, while Deacon took the single. After returning from checking on the horses for the night, Cedrik stripped off his shirt and pulled back the bedcovers. Derek was already sound asleep. Cedrik was grateful he had remained on his own side, for now at least. On the other side of the room, Deacon lay on his back, his eyes closed.

“You don’t want her to stay here, do you?” said Cedrik in a quiet voice.

“No,” he admitted. He didn’t open his eyes.

“If you can convince her, I’ll take her to the Imperial with me. We’ll start off tomorrow, and you can continue on alone.”

“She won’t,” was all he said.

The night waned away in sleeplessness. Deacon looked up through the dark. The room was pleasant, the bed comfortable, yet his body was unsettled, restless. What would become of her when he left her all alone in a world among strangers? These thoughts among others ate away at him, till finally he decided he would convince her to go with Cedrik. With a sudden sense of urgency, he flipped back his covers and ventured out to seek Magenta. Along the narrow hall he contrived what he would say to her. As he came to her door, he felt the grief in his chest again. He raised a knuckle hesitantly, then tapped lightly. There was no answer. He said in low tones, “I know you’re awake. Will you let me come in?”

There was still no response, and he was gripped momentarily with a tight fear. He forced the lock and slowly pushed open the door. Magenta stood with her back to him. Her face down, she looked into the flickering flame of a candle. Deacon softly closed the door behind him and waited a moment. In his chest was a heavy beating.

“Why do you not answer me?” he said with some reproof. He saw her stir and finally turn to face him. Her countenance was wan, yet she met his eye with such a strange, unwavering gaze that he was completely discomposed and could not find a word to say. He stood before her mute. It occurred to him that she might feel his coming an impertinence.

“Why are you here?” she asked in a toneless voice. There followed a deep silence to which all the torment that had gone before was nothing. He wanted to tell her to go with Cedrik, but he dared not assert himself.

“I wanted to speak with you,” he said, speaking more calmly than his look would have indicated. “Why will you not go to the Imperial with Cedrik?” he suddenly asked, despairing. “I fear to leave you alone.”

“I cannot conceive why you should care,” she said, with the slightest touch of contempt. He fell quiet, conscious of a throb deep in his heart. It was with timidity and grief that he sought to convince her, but her refusal was so final that, short of physically forcing her to go with Cedrik, he perceived there was nothing to be done. With pained resignation he slipped

the chain from round his neck. The jewel appeared as if transparent, filled with soft luminance.

“Here. Take this,” he said. “It is worth a considerable amount, I should imagine.” He held it out to her. When she refused, he shook it and said, “Take it—I have no use for it.” But she would not take it from him. Leaning past her, he placed it on the bedside table behind her. “I no longer want it pressing against my heart.” He didn’t draw back but paused near her. “It will fetch a fair price,” he repeated, feeling useless, then said hesitantly, “or you may keep it, if that is your wish.”

At the hopeless misery of it all, her eyes became veiled with tears, which she endeavoured to conceal by tilting her face from him. He felt a choke rise in his own throat. He could look nowhere except to her. Her firmness finally gave way, tears filled her eyes and stole freely down her cheek, exhausted of hope.

“Magenta …” He stood with helpless hands. “I would rather shed drops of my own blood, than have you shed tears for me.” But his words only made the tears flow afresh, even as her eyes closed against them. She had born the strain so long and continually, that she was unable to cease the flow now that it was released. He didn’t know where to place his hands and helplessly touched her arm. He felt on the verge of tears himself. “Please don’t,” he said weakly.

It was in a diminished voice that she uttered, “What would you have me do? I have tried to bear everything else—” She was checked with something like a low sob. In that moment he saw utter defeat in her eyes and it nearly tore out his heart. He stood mute. He was so deeply distressed by her sudden giving way that he would have, at this point, promised anything. In his helplessness he knew not what else to do. Brushing aside her hair he stooped and approached his lips to hers, but she turned her face and put his hands from her.

“The poorest of souls may well be content with the poorest of love,” she said quietly, scarcely moving her lips. Emotion would suffer her to say no more. She turned her back to him. He remained standing apart. Something in him broke, and he knew he could not endure being separated from her

anymore. The necessity was admitted, and his forbearance was obliterated, all strength and desire to resist were gone.

Magenta watched the flame flicker. She could not feel him. Quietly he drew close behind her, and gradually his presence made itself felt. She was aware of his chest close upon her back. She felt his hands sweep her hair back from her neck. At his first touch something in her stirred and responded out of the darkness, and her wounded heart filled silently with yearning.

He set the jewel round her throat and murmured close to her ear. “I would have you come with me, if I thought I had not destroyed any hope of it.” Very gently, very sadly, he urged her to face him. “Be with me always.” His look setting no bounds to his meaning, he put his arms round her and pressed his breast to her breast, which somehow felt bruised and hurt, so that she thought she could weep from the gentle pressure of his embrace.

They were silent, hid against each other. Lifting his face he found her mouth with soft, caressive lips. Then he paused as if he awaited some assurance of forgiveness, pressed against her very close. He had a frightened sense of her irreparable loss of love for him. She had returned his kiss faintly, but was tight and closed against him. Her heart was bound tightly in sorrow, so wounded it cringed upon itself. His heart sank in bitter despair. He stopped her hand from reaching and unclasping the necklace. “In my heart I have belonged to you all the time,” he murmured, broken. “My happiness lies in yours; they cannot be parted.”

At his words she gave way. Clinging to him, she fell into quiet sobbing, and cried with bitter cries, hoping that his nearness was not merely a departing vision. When her passion of anguish at last subsided, and she was quiet, he whispered to her a few faint words, which inevitably drew shuddering, sharp intakes of breath at short intervals; the only trace of her previous grief.

Here, in the nearness of answering feeling, they became profoundly still, his face pressed into her hair. In the depths of their silence the two were most intimately connected, with that pure affection which unites spirits.

“Don’t make me sleep alone,” he murmured, faltering, like a man when he supplicates some request which he desires intensely but fears to be denied. A reverent silence answered him, and with an unspoken consent they resumed with long, anguished kisses. The cruel feeling of separation drifted away and oneness came in the dark still aura of his love.

With a trembling heart, she stole her arms round his neck and pressed herself into the absorbing flow of his kiss. His will slackened and relaxed, no longer sharp and immovable, but full of human feeling and warmth. With a quiet gesture he extinguished the lamp, and she was in darkness, abandoned to him.

Never had she felt his eyes more upon her as she did now in the darkness, where she could not see, but only feel him, his touch so vivid and certain. Together they lay, breathing the still dark atmosphere. It gathered softly round them, and all outside thoughts dissolved into it. All her love, all her pain, came up and all her consciousness slipped and passed away, so there was only him. She was given to him and he to her. They were together, complete, eternal.

Before the night was ended they were quiet together in the dark. He lay against her bare skin, half upon her, caressing her with his mouth, loving her into a sense of herself. He clasped both her upraised hands in his and breathed into her ear his devotion. In this moment with her, he was free from the pressing of time. Together they spoke with low-toned tenderness. When she turned on her side he ran his fingers over her naked back, upon which he discovered the marks of evil deeds: strange, intricate patterns that had been inked deeply into the flesh. “What are these?” he murmured in his throat, with a frown.

“One for each offence,” she answered, then turned to face him. She lay warm against him, feeling adored and enfolded; he felt so familiar, so safe. She told him of all the things that had hurt her, and afterwards became quiet, lying partly on top of him, drifting near sleep, lulled by the rising and falling of his life’s breath beneath her. His body was relaxed, but his mind was going over all the things she had told him. The centre of him tightened with a sense of unjustness. She could feel that he was still awake and lifted her face. “Are you able to sleep?”

“I am,” he murmured. He stroked her hair, and she settled down against him again, his hand locked in hers with instinctive, almost unconscious tenderness; she would not part with it even in sleep. While she slept in his arms, he had an urge to go into her mind to see all the things she had seen and feel all the things she had felt. He wanted to know all she had suffered.

Feeling this undeniable urge, he raised himself above her. He placed his hand on her brow. She stirred slightly, and he remained still, breathlessly, until he was certain she was again sound asleep. Slowly and unobtrusively he went into her mind in search of thoughts, memories, and feelings. He was poised over her while images and emotions were hastening upon him.

There were children, little villains, that shouted with vile tongues, trying to shame her, casting stones which cut and bruised. Ghastly, wasted hands grasped her, and she felt that some terrible violence lurked beneath their touch. The prick of a thorn stung her. There was pain, fear, quivering, shaking. She was lame and ill, deathly so, locked in darkness where living cords snaked their way round her limbs, easily overcoming her frantic struggles. Things, leech-like, were sucking on her flesh, drawing on the venom, letting it from her blood, which had received too much.

Not long had he been inside her thoughts when it was his desperate wish to leave. So overwhelming as it was, he wanted to abruptly break free of her mind, but forcing himself to do so, he slowly withdrew. In him was a degree of gratification, knowing he was the sole possessor of her most intimate thoughts.

Panting, he lay his head against her soft breast. It’s often believed one likes to hear the beating of another’s heart, a reminder of the security he felt in his mother’s womb. He hated it. To him it was the sound of life wearing out, reminding him of the fragility of mortality. He shifted his face higher on her bosom, away from the ceaseless beating, and sank down into the comfort of her. It was such utter peace to just lie with her with no thought or will. In the softness of coming sleep, he felt the world pass away from him, and there was only her.

Morning found them much the same way. He had slept very deeply, so that he felt strangely revived. Leaning over her, he brushed his lips over her

sleeping brow. Outside the morning was pleasantly chill. He came to find Cedrik out by the stables, already preparing the horses. “Our course is still the same?” Cedrik asked when Deacon joined him.

“Yes,” came the brief answer, as if it needn’t have been asked. Deacon secured his bag to his horse, and without turning round, said, “But I don’t go alone.”

Cedrik made no comment. He had presumed as much, having noted Deacon did not return to his bed the previous night.

Chapter 38
Confession

Deaconpushed back the canvas flap and ducked into his tent. In the darkness he took off his shirt with quick, quiet movements and lay alongside the softly breathing form. Beneath the blankets his hands sought her, quietly and unobtrusively, her body hushed and peaceful in sleep. He brushed silent lips against her throat. She stirred and lay looking up into the eyes that were bent to hers; his body heavy and warm and soft. Their faces were so close they needed only to speak in murmurs. A tender frown crossed her brow. She touched his face and gently drew her finger along his cheek and over his mouth. He never knew what she saw when she looked at him with those eyes.

“Never before have my lips touched those of another, not my own mother even,” she said, murmuring.

His eyes, warm with love, smiled into hers through the dark, and passing a hand over her thigh affectionately, he sought her lips and clung to them, his mind straying soft and dark. Sinking into a kind of swoon, she allowed him to caress her with his mouth, turning her face aside so that his kisses might fall on her neck.

His arm folded her into him closer and closer, moving his mouth over her throat, but she could not prevent invasive thoughts; doubt filled her mind. She remembered the dark look in his eye, the guilt when he had expressed himself unworthy of her. There was some purpose he was bent upon, some ill-will driving him to Terium. All these thoughts worked in her mind. Her fears, gathering intensity, despite herself, prompted her to say softly through the dark, “Tell me why we travel to Terium?”

He became very still; his mouth still pressed against her throat. Her hand lingered at the base of his neck, waiting. All was very quiet. After a moment he sank back from her, but his eyes were on her. “Why do you

ask?” It was a question he resented, and at such a time. Nevertheless, in his new humility, he did not become agitated or impatient but rather sought to set her mind at ease, though he knew such an objective, under the circumstances, could only be achieved through a lie.

“Is there something there you seek?” she asked. Her eyes had a way of demanding truth.

“Yes.”

“Why do you conceal it from me; is it so terrible?”

“No, it’s not so terrible,” he said to her very gently, then explained to her, in the most deceiving tones, his false reasons. His words came as soothingly as his caresses over all her fears, but within himself he was ill. He was lying to her, and he hated himself. He rolled onto his back. Magenta settled against him. Her hand covered his, caressing it with the tenderest touch. His hands appeared different now that they had been upon her. She wanted to hold them and kiss them again and again.

“How did you come by this?” she asked, tracing the thin scar gently with her fingertips. Reflexively his hand closed into a fist, as if he didn’t want her touching past hurts.

“A gift from my father,” he said, showing in this remark the repressed suffering and hatred he had felt for so long.

“Does it bother you?”

“Sometimes.”

“What did he do to you?” she whispered, tightly.

“I don’t remember,” he answered truthfully. “I only remember pain.” His mood shifting, he rolled to his side and gathered her lovingly into himself. “I don’t want to speak about the past,” he murmured, and with helpless fingers stroked her cheek over and over, his mouth miserable. “I

wish only to cling to these precious moments, which are passing all too soon.”

She leaned forward, her lips a feather against his. He pressed himself into the security of her warmth, closely, as if he wished never more to withdraw from her; the two were motionless for some time. She would say nothing, but then it was he who volunteered, in a low, miserable voice, “He took everything from me. Everything I ever loved he took away—my home, my life, my memory of him.” Deacon lay bitter in the past, then added, “He took my mother.”

Magenta looked at him, not understanding. He rolled back, staring upward.

“When she died I felt as if I ventured a little way into death with her. I could taste the bitterness of it. I think she tore a piece of me and kept it with her.” He remained wordless for a time, then turned his eyes to her. “Do you remember what you said to me before, in the woods—that nothing is forever lost, that always it can be found?” A touch of scorn came to his voice. “Is that what you truly believe?”

“I do.”

He stared upward again. “It does little to ease the pain,” he said, some of his bitterness returning.

“No,” she assented softly.

He clenched his jaw, waiting to hear her say more, but she remained quiet, watching him helplessly, feeling his pain. Her silence made his tears rise. His throat worked as if it was difficult to swallow. His eyes were wide and fixed upward. Slowly a tear escaped the corner of his eye and stole down the side of his face. “She was afraid, and I couldn’t take the fear away—I couldn’t take away the fear, and it hurts me in my heart—”

He broke off. Words he longed to say caught in the back of his throat, choking him. He squeezed his eyes shut in a desire to banish the memories. He would much rather have endured physical pain than this weight pressing

on his heart. She sought his hand and gently clasped it. He moved slightly at her touch but did not rouse from despondency.

“There is little comfort for such sorrows,” she said, quietly. “But I would suffer a thousand miserable lives if I knew at the end of them I would have you.”

He slowly moved his head round on the pillow to look at her. His eyes tenderly searching her face, a deep frown gathered his brow, and his heart contracted with love. In her he had found a feeling of home. He leaned over and began to kiss her in a tearful haste, an anxious acceleration of desire, a deep, passionate weight on her mouth as if he would draw her into him and fuse her soul with his. He kissed and kissed with his sad mouth. And she, moved with compassion, lay aside herself and allowed him to take her with this sudden desperation to sate the need for union. Gone in a flame of passion, he abandoned all thought of past and future and gave himself over to the sweetness of the present, the inconceivable depths, the unutterable tenderness of affection between man and woman, which over and above all other relations, flows over wounds as a healing balm.

His intensely feeling heart, with all its capacity, its energy, was focused on her as the sole object of his devotion. In that intensity of tenderness, he clung to her till his desperate energy had expended itself and he lay still in her arms, his face resting against her breast. He lay there inside himself, as if in his own isolation, and yet with her, connected with her in love, his arm strong around her.

She lay dazed in the unbroken stillness. She could not remove the fear that he was hiding something. It lay upon her as a great weight. Yet as he lay helplessly against her, she could not help but look down at him with a tender heart. She would enfold him in warmth, she would give him all her own, so that he might never again feel the chill of lonely nights.

At the close of another the day, the travellers found a suitable resting place and lit a fire. The night drew in with a depressing sense of oppression. Deacon sat close to Magenta, their heads almost touching, their tone low and intimate. Derek amused himself by chewing on a piece of grass, watching the process Cedrik underwent to give his dagger the best

appearance, meticulously polishing the blade to ensure evenness and uniformity of finish. A large black bird swooped down into a tree near them and caused Deacon to glance up. Something in its black eye caught his attention, a kind of intelligence, keen and cunning.

Magenta looked up at him inquiringly as he slowly arose. There was a stirring in the unsettled air that disturbed him. With a sudden rageful gesture, he tore the intruder apart in a puff of black feathers. They all started to their feet in alarm. Magenta looked to Deacon with an alarmed expression of inquiry, but his eyes roved out into the night, trying to pierce the dark. He was listening, and unconsciously everyone fell into listening with him.

“Don’t be far from me,” he cautioned, reaching out to bring her near. For a short time he failed to observe anything, then something stealthy moved within the shadows, prowling. He sighted its sleek hide moving among the trees. To the brothers, he lifted his face to indicate its direction. Cedrik and Derek soundlessly unsheathed their swords.

They had only done this, when from within the shadows, hostile eyes encountered Deacon’s. The beast emitted a frightful roar, and with a mighty spring leaped out. It collected him on the way, clawing him, and knocking Magenta to the ground in the process. Directly came four more of these bristling beasts, charging down upon them so suddenly the brothers scarce had time to ready themselves for the onrushing ferocity.

Deacon struggled as he went down beneath the great body, striving to compose his mind. This he achieved, and in a sudden violent flare, his entire body became ablaze, engulfing the beast in flames. A shriek of torture issued from its gnashing jaws, which seemed aimed for his throat, and with a tremendous roll and heave, Deacon hurled its blackened body off and away from him. It lay limp on its side, all four paws stilled.

Magenta, in shock, remained helpless where she had first fallen, yet the brutes made no attempt on her, but were instead bent on tearing apart her companions. Without the loss of a moment, Deacon was on his feet and heading toward her when the beast, presumed dead, made a spring for him from behind. Its lunging presence made an impression before its physical

body. Deacon suddenly turned and with an effort of will, caught it out of the air and hurtled it a distance. It yelped and rolled with a gruesome twisting of its body before recovering itself, emitting roars of pain and rage.

Magenta made a sudden dash for Deacon and was forced to a halt when a beast bolted between them. She was off again in an instant, and Deacon caught her in one arm. With his other he reached up to the trees and brought down a hefty branch on the back of the burned animal, which had been poised to leap.

The campsite was in total disarray. The tethered horses reared so violently to disengage they almost injured themselves. Cedrik and Derek's troubles were no less demanding. They were rushed upon by these determined brutes, which had cold, directed hate in their eyes, something electric and conscienceless, along with the weirdness of the enchantment that gripped their wills and yielded them to a cruel master. They were strong and relentless. It took many strikes before the mighty creatures showed any signs of weakening.

Almost stumbling and falling, Derek fended off claws and gnashing teeth, forced constantly backward, awaiting his moment to thrust a killing strike before the beast reached him and mauled him into death. Cedrik slashed at the thick hide, even as he turned and guided his sword point to one of those electric eyes, the action of which brought forth a deafening shriek. Another bristled and angrily leapt at his throat with its blood-thirsty fangs.

Cedrik came forward to meet it, slashing at the base of the neck. A single well-placed hit would have crippled even this great monster. As it clawed past, it caught his shoulder, opening the material and his flesh alike. Wild with rage, Cedrik brought the beast down. Throwing himself full upon its back and finding the vulnerable flesh in the upper shoulder, he plunged his dagger again and again, till the object that caused his fury finally stilled and died.

He achieved this impressive feet only through his cousin's efforts at keeping its kin at bay. Deacon sent one assault after another, seeking to utterly destroy the enemies that had provoked his wrath. They were highly

resistant to his efforts and terrifically strong. He held his chest painfully from the heavy exertion.

The struggle that ensued overwhelmed the companions, and they had no choice but to flee, Deacon sending light and energy away in a shockwave to give them a chance to outdistance their foe. He took hold of Magenta and together they fled through the obscure mass of trees. He held her hand tightly pressed within his own, so they might not easily be separated, drawing on her till she was at her full speed. They darted through clawing-branches that snagged and caught at their clothes and faces.

Derek skidded to a sudden halt and would have toppled over into a dark pit if not checked by his brother's strong arms from behind. Magenta was not so fortunate. Deacon's eyes saw it quicker than hers, but before he could recover himself, she stumbled and fell, almost taking him down with her. His frantic hands clutched at her as she went from his grasp. The hot blood rushed to his head, and he stared wide-eyed after her, himself hanging half-over the edge.

Below she dangled precariously and out of his reach. She groped for a hold upon the rocky surface. Almost she slipped when several pieces dislodged, with a clatter of loose earth and stones. They seemed to meet no end, for there was no sound as they disappeared into the blackness. Every time she tried to heave herself up, a rock would slip from under and threaten to drag her down with it.

For a time the shock of the occurrence left Deacon deprived of coherent thought and incapable of action. The nerve and cool head so necessary to his ability were destroyed. He looked around for the means to facilitate her assent, and sighting a large elm, demanded of Derek, "Give me your sword."

Without a minute lost, Deacon lopped off a branch and thrust it down to her. Their pursuers could not be far behind, but the fear of the new threat was still upon them. Grasping the lowered object with her hands, Magenta began to climb upward, while he held fast to the opposite end, drawing up the ascender with simultaneous effort. When she neared the top he reached

to her. She stretched a hand to him with much gratitude. Cedrik came forward to assist.

Derek wisely stood back from the edge while the two men, crouched upon the brink of the abyss, grabbed and pulled her to safety. Only a moment could they spare to sentiment. The beasts would soon be upon them. Unfortunately, to risk descent into an unknown pit at night was equally perilous. They had no choice but to double back into the woods, but an idea came swiftly to Deacon. He turned to his companions and instructed them to remain soundless and without motion. As if drawing a blanket over their heads, he cloaked them in profound darkness, so they appeared no different from the shadows of night, concealing them from wicked eyes. They waited there under the protection of what he had done, while Deacon stood apart and did the same for himself, but not before he sent thick fogs and mists over the pit.

The charging beasts, in pursuit of the prey that had evaded them, rushed forth unaware of the peril and all at once, plunged into the blackness. But ere those that were concealed had time to breathe relief, powerful claws revealed themselves and began to grope and claw their way back up. Only two of the beasts had plummeted to their death. Deacon stepped free of his shadowy concealment. His energies responding quickly to his will, he sent forth a bombardment of forced air, which drove the brutes backward and into the black depths, lost with their kin.

When they returned to camp, Cedrik and Derek went directly to the horses to see the extent of any injuries. Deacon moved about highly agitated, Magenta motionless near him. “Do you think it safe to remain here?” asked Cedrik, stroking the horse’s neck. He had tied something tightly round his own arm to stop the flow of blood.

Deacon stalked back and forth like a cornered animal. He stopped abruptly and said tightly, “You will return home, and you will take her with you!” He had such a determined air that there seemed no opposing him. Almost instantly Magenta’s face became grave and questioning.

“You will not return with us?”

For a moment Deacon stood at a loss, while she looked to him with mournful reproach. Both Cedrik and Derek moved away from the tense pair, uttering some vague reason, but they were so little conscious of anything outside of each other that the entire wood could have caught fire unseen and unheard. Less agitated than before, Deacon went to her. “You will be safer with them,” he reasoned, gently.

“There would be less peril for all involved if you would return with us.” It was reasonable logic, but he ignored it because it went against him. “You would rather make wild ventures than return with me?” she asked, sadly. His eyes sought the ground, and her fears were realized. “The reasons you spoke of—you have deceived me?”

His reluctant eyes lifted to met hers. She released his arm and withdrew slightly. “I hardly know whether I love or despise you most,” she said, with something like despair.

“I would ask you to await my return, but you may yet despise me most.”

“Why do you say these things?” she asked. “Speak more freely.”

“Will you await my return?”

Her voice barely a breath: “Answer me.”

It seemed uncertain whether he would venture to speak. Then: “There is a man there,” he admitted tightly.

She frowned, not understanding.

“I mean to kill him.”

The sinking feeling when an undesirable truth is reached made her suddenly ill and faint. It was with heavy dismay that she asked. “Whose blood are you so anxious to spill?” His eyes soon gave an answer and she understood. “You told me he had died.”

“He’s as good as.”

“He’s not been punished?”

“It’s not enough,” he said with his suppressed hatred. “I want to look into his eyes and watch him die.” He clenched his teeth with pain. “And in his last breath, when he begs my forgiveness—deny him.” He spoke in a voice filled with such controlled hate it was hardly his own.

“You’re so very conscious of time, and yet you would waste it with vengeance?” she said. “How can you expect me to wait for you, knowing what it is that I await you for?”

His face grew pale with anger. He felt the threat of her words like a hot sting of betrayal. “Am I to understand, then, that you would cast me aside if I should make an attempt?” She looked at him with an expression more painful to see than the bitterest of tears. He cried brutally, “Why should you care if the world is short one less black-hearted bastard!” Even in its anger his voice was pleading for understanding.

“I care what it will do to you.” Lightly she touched his averted face. He stared out into the night, shaking his head with angry refusal. “I fear you will come away changed. Please don’t go.” Her light touch seemed to be pleading with him.

“You know I will.”

“What of those words you spoke to me?” she said with a significance meant for him alone. “Shall I not hear them again?” She took his hand and pressed it to her lips, then to her face, holding it there. “It is too cruel a fate to have finally found you, only to have you thus pass from me.”

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. “Remain true to me—wait for me—and we needn’t part. This will only pose a temporary separation,” he said. His hope beat up again. She disengaged from his hand and shook her head, mute with misery. He bowed his face in his hands for a few moments, then suddenly looked up. “You don’t understand what you’re asking!” There was so much pain and frustration in his voice, it was harder to hear than the most piteous pleading. “You don’t know what it is to watch the one nearest your heart, sick and dying in frailty and the crippling feeling of

helplessness, a sense of futility that dominates as a dark weight that will not lift.

“In this despair I watched her shrinking frame which seemed by inches to dissolve and vanish in death. I watched this process of slow dying without power to stop it. It was as if I was dying with her, inside myself. Toward the very end she would partake of food so little, I would beg and plead with her. But her body, if not she, would reject it—the human form, when so frail, loses its ability to accept sustenance, even if the will to live is there.

“I knew she would die, and with that reality comes hopelessness, made all the more keen knowing her unbroken will was strong, not ready to die, while her wounded body, giving way, submitted her to the fearful, empty space of inevitability, imprisoned in this horrible inescapable fate which was killing her.” Holding back the burning tears he continued. “Before the time of death even came, she was only half conscious; her eyes had no vision within them. The darkness of death was between her and the light of life. I could not reach her; she was alone, and she was afraid.

“We all die alone, I know, but not like that—not how she suffered. It was the cruelest thing I have had to endure. And this he did.” Deacon clenched his teeth. “Do you have any notion, even in the slightest degree, what it is to have this depth of anguish inflicted by the very person who should have been the one to shield her from injury and evil?”

Magenta, overcome by his anguish, was voiceless. It was a cruel pain to see him so hurting, so helplessly desperate, and she could do nothing. There was something heart-rendering about his mouth as he spoke. “He should have protected her! He shouldn’t have let her die—” He could not command his voice and gave up. The situation was so flooded and clouded with emotion, Magenta did not yet come to understand that when he spoke the last, it was not of his father, but of another whom he felt had betrayed her.

Soon he recollected himself and said in a much lower voice, “I swore to her, not in spoken words, but in all my thoughts, that I would avenge her. I would be a traitor to myself if I did not fulfil that promise.” When she

hesitated, a fearful doubt coming into her face, he pursued earnestly, “Would you not have me avenge my own mother’s death? Would you deny me of that—deny her?”

Magenta weakened before his solemnities and said, defeated, “I have no answer to surpass yours.”

Clutching her, he said, “Please try to understand.”

“What is it you wish me to say?”

He could see the fear of uncertainty in her face and became desperate in his heart. “Say you’ll wait for my return, that you’ll not despise me for what must be done, that we are as we have been, that you won’t turn from me, that you love me. Promise it will be as I have said—you must promise me this.” His entreaties were poured forth with controlled effort, but still with frantic hands he clung to her. When she did not respond as he so desperately wished, he released her angrily and asked, “What should prevent you? You said you had resolved to be mine.”

“You will come away forever changed,” she said with a calm sadness. “One soul cannot wound another and not leave a fixed mark.”

“He has already left a fixed mark! You know not the chill of such a betrayal, and they let it happen, they let her die.” There was so much hate in those muttered words, it appeared a shadow deepened on his countenance and made it black. “I will see them all suffer. After their deception I believe I shall be justified in going to all lengths.”

His words fell upon her dark and heavy. “What do you mean?” she asked, confused as to whom he now spoke of. “What is it that you mean by that?”

With a strength of which he was unconscious, he suddenly gripped her shoulders. “Why are you not listening to the things I’m telling you!” he cried with singular distress. He could hear the coarse ugliness of strained emotion in his own voice but somehow could not contain himself. “Did I not say they let her die! More than that, they deceived me into leaving her

so they might cast away her mortal burden, which to them was a mere stain on the white-cold fabric of their immortal perfection!" Scarcely conscious of his actions, he tightened his grip. He could hardly find sufficient vent in words. "Do you listen to me!" he demanded severely. He seemed to be breaking apart before her eyes, passionate in his need for her to understand.

Magenta winced, confronted by the strength of his suffering. Her heart seemed unable to beat. "I am listening," she said, barely audibly, with a softness and sincerity that was more effective than anger. He clutched her round behind the neck and pressed his face to hers. His heart beat with increasing violence.

"Don't turn against me, Magenta." Almost he pleaded, but there was something distinctly cold and reproachful in the sound of his voice. "I still need you. I cannot bear the misery and hopeless solitude of this world without you. Do not withdraw your love from me. If you could only feel what I have felt you would understand …" In utter desperation he said, "Let me give you my thoughts." She stiffened against him, and he pleaded softly, "Please don't be afraid," pushing his restless face into hers, his mouth hot against her cheek. He ignored her faintly uttered refusal and clenched her tightly to himself.

Instantly a look of fear and anguish seized her; into her mind entered thoughts and feelings that seared her consciousness like fire. She cringed away from him, turning aside her face. She wanted to hide from him. Helpless in his grasp, she shrank from the memories that crowded upon her, so full of misery and confusion, tortured with such hatred, she could see only darkness.

The black mists and clouds that had cast shadows on his spirit, the utter confusion which blackened him, blinded her. He was like living darkness, covering her, taking her breath. With excessive force he transferred to her the same dark flame that possessed his blood. She could not feel him, only rage, passion, grief, and death. She felt it all as a crushing weight, so bewildered and overcome with intense emotion she could scarce stand by her own strength. All this time he clutched her in his arms, straining her till she became pale and faint.

Gradually his hold relinquished, and she hung in his arms, panting and exhausted, making an effort of consciousness; she had not yet the presence of mind to speak. Brought back to a sense of herself, she choked on a sob and let her head bow forward into his chest. Her hands groped for him as if she had lost him in the dark. Presently, she stilled against him. Her eyes closed. She wanted to lie against him and find rest, her emotions spent and worn.

In this stillness a sense of loneliness came. She could not feel him, only will and determination. At length she lifted up her face. Her countenance showed that the mental and emotional exertions of the experience had left her faint and afraid. For a long moment she looked at him. He knew not what her silence meant, and with a fearful heart said, “Speak!” His face was devoid of colour.

She again became distraught, desperate at the threat of separation. “Deacon.” She held his face between her hands. “Do not venture where I cannot find you,” she pleaded, and looking up into his face with an expression intensely mournful, murmured: “I feel I should die without you.” Her forehead sank against his chin. “If you go to Terium, I will not be at your side, and I will not be awaiting your return.”

He became dangerously quiet, struggling in his heart with a sharp bitterness that was rising up within him. Almost imperceptibly he held himself hard and away from her, a heavy pounding in his chest, which rose and fell with the convulsive heavings of a man deeply wounded. He had bared his soul to her, and it had availed him nothing.

At that moment he looked up and saw Cedrik and Derek coming through the trees toward the camp. They had heard the violence in his voice. He drew her back slightly, so he could look into her face, and said, “Say nothing of what has been spoken between us.” The words came out hard from his throat, which now felt hoarse and choked.

“Are we to spend the night here?” asked Cedrik, breaking the tense silence. Deacon seemed to flinch at the intrusion. Mechanically he drew back from her and looked up to his cousin.

“I think so.” He wiped the sweat from his brow. As he went to pass, he paused near her. “I leave in the morning with or without your favor.” He felt a slight struggle in his throat. “You cannot alter my course.”

His face was set so hard in uncompromising lines that she knew there was nothing to be done with him. Something within her broke and sank. She knew that by morning, as sure as the sun would rise, he would be gone. Without a further word Deacon escaped to the isolation of his tent. He unwrapped the bundle of bedding and spread it on the ground, his mind numb. He knew not whether she would spend the night by his side, but not for an instant did his intention waver. Ducking briefly out to retrieve his bag, he was confronted by Cedrik, who said, blunt and to the point, “My father always said that revenge is a knife sharpened at both ends. It cuts both ways.”

Deacon’s mouth compressed. He looked past Cedrik to where Magenta stood with eyes that spoke of betrayal, his whole countenance showing fierce resentment. Her courage failed under his condemning gaze, and her eyes fell beneath his. She knew he would consider it disloyalty, but she felt she had no choice. Deacon then looked to the other standing before him and said with vexed impatience, “Save your breath, Cedrik; I’ll not suffer through your moralizing.”

To this came a determined reply: “Please, hold your peace until I have said what I must say.” He went on hurriedly, lest Deacon should speak and interrupt before he had put forth his argument, but Deacon said nothing, which was worse. He seemed to be an impenetrable black wall.

With ever-increasing agitation Cedrik spoke his mind. He had got himself so worked up anyone seeing him for the first time would find it hard to believe in his customary good-naturedness.

“Give me no more advice!” said Deacon with fierceness. “I have reasons good as any man ever had for killing, and I intend to.”

Cedrik shook his head with anger. “Your mother would be anguished to find you so reduced.”

Deacon’s control broke at that. He felt it, like a struck flint, flaring up and burning inside his chest. He clenched his fist and dealt a blow hard enough to stagger Cedrik. He stumbled forward himself from the force, then stood straight, his shoulders rising and falling with each forced breath. His lungs felt full of fire.

Cedrik’s initial impulse was to retaliate, but he maintained control, pressing the back of his hand to his lip, which was split and bleeding. “Better?” he asked and turned aside his face, spitting blood. “You must hear reason!” he cried as Deacon pushed past him. “Damn you! You’re going to get yourself whipped and hanged for murder; do you understand that?”

With a blackened countenance Deacon said, “I warn you now, Cedrik, do not attempt to prevent me!” With impatient fury, he began to fit the saddle on his horse. He would not endure another night with them after such a breach of trust.

“Don’t turn your back on me,” said Cedrik. He started forward, furiously checked by his brother’s embrace, who feared the strife would escalate into something seriously injurious.

“Let him go,” said Derek, restraining Cedrik. His tone more than his arms succeeded in this.

Magenta came to Deacon’s side trying in vain to calm him. He cast on her a savage glance. “You betrayed me,” he said and mounted the flustered beast. His name broke from her lips with an agony of entreaty such as would penetrate the hardest of hearts, yet he swung up without so much as a glance backward. With sudden desperation she smothered her mouth and nose with her hands as if she would weep. He gave a brutal kick to the beast’s side and made off through the darkened trees. He was gone from her.

A pallor spread over her features, and she placed her hand against the tree as if she might fall from actual physical weakness. He had taken her breath away with him, and it did not return for the longest time.

Presently Cedrik came to her side, while Derek stood back with a look no less concerned. Cedrik rubbed his face and said in a matter-of-fact tone, “It’s impossible for us to reach home before he reaches Terium, but there is nothing else for us to do. He’s beyond me; there’s no way for me to restrain him. When we return, you will tell Éomus everything he spoke to you.” Magenta nodded weakly, still staring out into the dark. Cedrik wiped the sweat from his mouth and looked at her, his face softened. Putting his hand on her shoulder, he said, “Whatever his conduct, you can be certain he loves you.” He was distressed to feel her tremble slightly beneath his hand.

“Not enough,” she said, bitterly but subdued with despair.

Alone among the trees, Magenta stood staring into the night, broken hearted, her features listless with anguish. A single strand of black hair blew across her tear-stained face. She was lost in this sorrowful reverie when from behind a presence made itself felt upon her. Perhaps when she turned she expected to see Cedrik, for she suddenly became pale, a fear struck her heart.

Out from the shadows approached Fraomar, and as she met his eyes, a malicious smile of greeting went over his face. It was painfully sweet to have her alone and in his charge. He could barely contain himself. “Magenta,” he said with a familiarity she resented. “Your father has requested I escort you home.” His voice was calm and appealing, belying his violent countenance.

“If I should not consent?” she asked, looking at him with angered, frightened eyes.

He smiled with an arrogant twist of the lips and leaned toward her, speaking so that each word might fall distinctly on her ear, “The choice does not lie with you.” His face became cruel, and with a brute force that would disgrace an ogre, he brought his forearm down on her cheek.

Chapter 39
Seized

Enveloped in a kind of numbness of mind, but beneath the surface seething with tortured rage, Deacon rode for almost an hour without stop. He was exhausted from physical and emotional exertions, and so of the first wayside inn he came across he decided to take refuge from the night. Except for the occasional raised voice, all was quiet. The dark corners held discreet murmurs and those wishing no company beyond their own. A cold breeze came in each time the door opened, which fortunately was not often.

Deacon downed the last remnants of his drink, not lifting his down-bent face. His grim presence accorded with others in the room. Inwardly he struggled as if exerting himself to abide by a dark will that seemed to dominate almost in a separate consciousness. Despite his deeply fixed hate, he could not easily accept the idea of having to leave without the woman whose enduring love was the only source of meaning in a world of pain and fear.

He winced at the memory of her last look of mute pleading. The door opened, and heavy, intrusive boots stepped in and paused at the threshold, as if the man observed his surroundings with focused intent. Deacon, becoming aware of the presence, half-turned, and at the sight of Fraomar, slowly rose to his feet. With a jerk of the head Fraomar gestured for Deacon to come to the door, which he held open. “I have something you may like to see.”

His blood burning, Deacon went to the door, paling with fear as that of a man who suddenly wakes to find himself standing on the edge of a precipice. Outside stood a second man, and imprisoned in his arms Magenta slumped forward, her long black hair draping down over her bent face. A muscle flexed in Deacon’s jaw. How cowardly it was to use the woman to get at the man.

“Compose yourself and come outside,” said Fraomar quietly. For a moment Deacon stood motionless, pain and rage at his heart. Then, slowly, as if against his will, he stepped out into the night and toward the man and his captive. At Deacon’s approach, she made an effort to lift her face to look at him. A deep frown gathered on his brow, and his eyes warmed in sympathetic torment, as a new wave of anger coursed through him at the sight of her wounded face. As if the effort was too much, her head again lolled forward. Fraomar took a threatening place at her side, and touching her hair, said to Deacon, “You will accompany us without opposition, or your reluctance will have an unpleasant cost.”

His eyes fixed on Magenta, Deacon seemed deaf to the words. He could have wept over her bruised and cut face that was so pale as to be ghostly. The thought of her bandied about between the two men filled him with a violent rage that made him tremble. He feared and dared not anger them. He slowly lifted his eyes to Fraomar, his unsureness plain in his features. “You can go no further,” he said, brokenly. “She is a priestess and daughter to—”

“Do you doubt me—suppose that I make false threats?” asked Fraomar, presenting a formed dagger at her throat, which was held exposed by the unkind hand tangled in her hair. He purposefully cut a line deep enough to draw blood.

There was but a faint whimper from the slender uplifted throat. Deacon raised both hands open in a gesture of submission. “Please—” is all he said. A note of desperation broke his voice.

Fraomar put away the dagger and next took his captive round the body, telling his companion to bind the younger man’s hands. The man seized Deacon and clamping on the wrist irons, said, “You killed several of my most beloved pets.”

“I shall reunite you if that is your wish.” Deacon saw him draw back his fist, and then blackness.

Deacon could scarcely recall the blow that had rendered him consciousless. Hanging upside down, suspended under a large tree, he felt blood run down his face, half-blinding him. How long he had hung here

senseless he could hardly guess. All the pressure had gone to his head, and he was more than a little disorientated. When he opened his eyes he saw that his cousins were hanging on either side of him, and his heart and hopes sank.

Seized with a violent fear, he cast a wild look about himself. Over by the campfire among several other men he saw, through a blood-red haze, Fraomar with Magenta's head across his knee, gently and insistently wiping blood from her face with the hem of her dress, while she, passive and broken, lay listless.

Involuntarily, Deacon uttered a strangled cry and thrashed about with shouts of rageful warning. When at last he was somewhat calmed, a man named Theron came forward. He spoke with a directness and authority which suggested he was the man in charge of the party. There were around fifty men along with the rangers, of which there were nine, each apt at his own particular skill.

Cedrik and Derek had not yet regained consciousness but beyond a few abrasions, had received no serious injuries. Cedrik had taken the greater beating; his forehead was bruised and had bled. Theron came to stand near Deacon, whose self-control was hanging by a thread. The veins stood out on his strained neck.

"You know why you are here, do you not?" Theron asked his vengeful prisoner. Although there was no response beyond heated silence, he continued as if he had received an affirmative answer, and among other threats against Deacon, told him those he loved would die if full cooperation and compliance was not abided by. When he was satisfied the message rang clear, Theron ordered them to be cut down. "Don't let him fall on his head." He pointed to Deacon and stood back and watched as they did this. "We shall talk more in the morning," said Theron, before his men took the captives and chained them to a picketed post.

All the while Deacon's baleful eyes were fixed on Magenta. She was still with Fraomar, who was forcing upon her some liquid. As he watched Deacon was motionless. It was the stillness of white-hot wrath. He had a painful sense of her being tortured by Fraomar's attentiveness. The way he

held her was very familiar and possessive. And Deacon was powerless, bound and defenceless in the hands of ill-intentioned men.

When Magenta had somewhat recovered she sat upright, passive in her captor's arms. She offered little resistance to his overbearing attentions. To do so would be futile and only result in further humiliation. She endured the crude, frightful jokes about passing her round and the hostile, superstitious looks of the other men. Despite Fraomar's cruel conduct she remained mute, without moving, her eyes unseeing. She was as if violated into senselessness, but though outwardly she was broken and listless, inwardly she was beyond him, closed off. Nothing he did could touch her.

When he left her alone a moment, turning his attention to a man next to him, she blinked and slowly dared to look over at Deacon, who was already looking at her. He gave her a sorrowful glance profound in its meaning, and it needed to be, for it had to do the work of many words. In a deep, subtle way Magenta was sustained by his reflective wretchedness, a sense of suffering together, his eyes never leaving hers.

Fraomar at once felt the hot sting of jealousy when he saw that which they shared unspoken. He would not let her go to him but kept hold of her.

Presently Theron came to Magenta and as a plain command told her to come with him. She very hesitantly, very reluctantly arose. She looked over to where Deacon sat.

Fraomar rose to his feet also. He seemed reluctant to part with her. "You keep the priestess beside you tonight?"

"She will sleep in one of these tents, under guard."

Magenta looked back at Deacon and the brothers with deep longing. "I will remain out in the night with them," she said.

"No," was Theron's blunt reply, holding out his hand for her to come.

"It would be my preference."

“Nevertheless …” He motioned for her to come with him. When she did not, he reached out an ungentle hand and took her by the arm. He began to lead her away, but with imploring hesitance she resisted, looking back over her shoulder all the while. The thing she dreaded most was separation from him, to be kept from him. Deacon watched and could see that in the next few moments she would be in tears. It tore at his heart. When she was gone from view he let his head hang in despair. It was a relief when his cousins came to. They remained subdued and defeated, but their presence and comradeship somehow encouraged him. A single guard surveyed them.

Fraomar did not go to his own bed but stood at a distance from Deacon and watched with jealous eyes, half-believing it was because of him that she was not already and long since his own. Theron, passing, said, “There is not much of the night left. Get yourself some sleep. Tomorrow I send some men into the village to retrieve supplies.”

He went away into his tent and left Fraomar in his hatred, nursing his spite. Jealousy excited within him the fiercest savagery of his nature. He could feel it in his blood, taste it in his mouth, and now he had the desire to regard Deacon more closely. He strode over to him, and without a word, struck Deacon a blow with his fist, so forceful he made himself reel as if drunk.

Deacon managed to remain on his feet, but his mouth was filled with blood. Discontented, Fraomar followed directly with another, which felled his hated friend to the ground. Cedrik and Derek both leapt to their feet, anger welling up inside, but could do nothing. Before Deacon had a chance to recover, he was kicked onto his back and felt a heavy knee planted on his chest.

“That woman is bound to me and I to her. What right have you then to come between us?” said Fraomar, his voice trembling.

In utter desperation the brothers strained against their restraints with rageful shouts at their harasser, who with blind recklessness vented his pent-up aggression. All the animosity and all the insane jealousy that had been burning in him was now focused in rage on the single object of his hatred. Deacon raised his arms over his face in a burrowing motion, in a

feeble attempt to protect himself. Fraomar struck him again and again. He was savage and unsparing in each blow and inflicted on him a punishment that would kill a weaker man.

“Damned bastard!” cried Cedrik, making violent efforts to disengage himself. The guard did nothing to intervene but stood watching. Roused by the commotion, several men came out and beyond revelling with ill-humour in the shameful brutality, did nothing.

“None of that!” broke in Theron’s voice of authority. “Back away! Back away, I say!” Fraomar begrudgingly ceased his battery, choking still with rage. Theron pushed him apart, shouting, “He will be of little use to us dead!” With reluctance Fraomar stepped back from his victim. He blinked the sweat from his eyes. Theron shouted, “Move off—all of you!”

Muttering their amusement, the men dispersed and went away. Only when he was certain Fraomar had truly taken himself off, did Theron return to his own confines. Cedrik and Derek sat mute, their eyes fixed on Deacon who lay curled in agony. His heart was wounded more than his body. He could not keep Fraomar from hurting her, and it was killing him. All the night he feared that Fraomar might seek to lie down beside her. In torment and wretchedness, Deacon pressed his face into the cold dirt. He almost choked at the thought of the brute approaching her, his hands over her body.

Morning came. Deacon lay on the very same spot, his arm folded across his eyes. The first sight that met his blurred vision was Theron standing over him. With the tip of his boot, Theron gave the limp form a nudge in the side, as if to see if it was still alive. “How’s your head?” he asked and stooping down, dragged Deacon to a sitting position. “Have yourself some food and we will talk more.” Derek, his nerves raw, was ready to pronounce some words against the man but was cautioned by his brother to remain quiet.

Theron left them and returned to the campfire to have breakfast. When he returned he brought a stool for himself to sit upon. He handed to Deacon a piece of parchment with strange runes and diagrams. “I need you to look at this,” he said, seating himself opposite.

Deacon was vague and unresponsive. Distractedly he looked at the sheet as if he could not focus, his eyes constantly looking up to find Magenta. He had not yet seen her, nor had he seen her antagonist. “To bring down the obstruction,” said Theron, “you must solve the combination just as of any lock. When your mind is concentrated, you can feel the energy and solve the puzzle.”

Theron’s words were lost on Deacon. He was subdued and distracted. At the sight of Magenta he straightened as if coming awake and watched her keenly. She was with Fraomar. He sat her down and took a place at her side. Her look at Deacon, though brief, was reassuring, and he felt an ache of relief that seemed to extend beyond his heart and made his head light as if faint.

Fraomar put his arms about the slender figure of his captive, making her sit pressed against his body. He took a mouthful of food himself, then put some to her mouth, aggressive in offering his unrequested and unwanted assistance. Deacon watched, and the sight of it pounded his head till scarcely could he see straight.

All the while Theron continued speaking: “If you can’t sustain the energy until completion, the lock releases and reverts to its former state, and you’ll have to start again, so it’s very important that you not break until the task is completed. Do I have your attention?” Deacon was looking past him over to Magenta, a distracted and raging frown on his brow.

“You said no harm would come to her.” He spoke quickly with accusation and question.

Theron turned on his seat and looked over his shoulder to observe what the issue was. He then turned back to Deacon. “She’s fine. Now worry about your own well-being. If you don’t pay attention and focus, you’ll find yourself to be the one hurt.” He thrust the sheet of parchment at him again. “If you break for even an instant, you will have to start over again.”

Fraomar took it upon himself to watch the more delicate captive. All throughout the day he tended to her with officious attentiveness. He was manipulative in the way he handled her, as if asserting his right as the more

dominant. Yet inwardly she resisted him in a way that maddened him. He had her within his grasp, yet still she seemed so untouchable. “Will you come walk with me awhile?” he asked. “It is long since we have been together alone. There are things I must say to you.”

“There is nothing for you to say that I wish to hear.”

This was a cruel rejection for Fraomar, and in the manner of men after his nature, he grasped her arm with a bruising hold. “Nevertheless you shall hear them,” he said, but she resisted his coercive grip with unexpected strength. “I don’t wish to speak with you before such an audience,” he said with a ring of insistence, pressing her arm. “Do not force me to it.”

In desperate reluctance her eyes went to Deacon, who was speaking still with Theron.

“We shall stay in view of him,” said Fraomar, resentfully, but as the only way he could conceive to persuade her without a struggle, and though it was with great reluctance, she went with him. They stood near a thicket of trees a short distance from camp. He kept a firm hold of her upper arm, so that it felt bruised and sore. With his free hand he pushed back her hair to observe her face, which no longer showed any trace of his brutalities beyond a small cut at the corner of her mouth. Her complexion was again pale as winter. Silently she awaited his words.

He rubbed his brow as if suffering confusion of mind. “I feel misunderstanding has played a part in our …” He stopped as if searching a word, then said, “Misfortune.” The hard lines about his mouth and brow retreated, and in their place came an expression of meekness. “You must give me your forgiveness. The discomfort I imposed on you was necessary —” He seemed uncertain for a moment, her expression unyielding. He touched her with timorous hands as though suddenly fearful of her now in her restored state.

“See how quick you are to heal?” he said with empty enthusiasm, then with a hint of accusation: “The wounds you have laid on me run far deeper and will not repair with such ease. I had not meant you harm. In my suffering a darkness came over me.” He made an effort to put his lips on her

shoulder but she withdrew it. He looked on her with impatient imploring. “Please don’t be unkind to me! Let me be punished in some other form. I cannot endure this. Tell me how I can reprove myself in such a manner as will insure me your affection, and I will do it.”

From where he sat, Deacon watched the two converse with eyes of suffering and torment. “Don’t look at her. Look at me,” said Theron; roughly he redirected his attention. “This is the image you need to be seeing in your head.” He thrust at Deacon the piece of parchment he was sick almost to death of seeing.

Fraomar cast nervous eyes over to the party of men to see if they observed. He tried to coerce her to go even further from camp, but she would not go, convinced of her inadequacy for the struggle should he attempt violence. She had pulled somewhat apart from him, and his despair intensified.

“Why do you not want to be kind to me? I adore you—your hair and your lips. Your skin smells of flowers. It suffocates me. All these years so full of restrained passion. I have waited for you. Even now I dare to hope for a return of my love.” His hand sought affection and feared to find contempt. “If I could be but assured you would at least try to accept me—this alone restrains me. As it is you who has caused me to love, is it wrong that I should expect you to at least attempt to be receptive to my affections?”

She pushed aside his hand and continued to look him directly in the face.

“Why despise me?” he said. “The things I have done you have provoked me to with your coldness. Perhaps if you would speak with me reasonably —”

“I can hardly regard you a rational participant,” she said. “You have disregarded my repeated refusal, acting on the false impression that I was not in earnest when I gave my opinion of your persistence, and even to believe I had encouraged you—”

“What is a man if he has not hope?”

“Dare not to hope! In your senseless incapability to see reason, you have so obstinately pursued me as to injure and grieve me and any near to my heart. You would try to intimidate me, divide my loyalties, hurt me, and attempt by such means to force my acceptance of you,” she said and told him that after such he must finally consider himself fully and irrevocably cast from her. She would have drawn away, but he pressed her closer, gripping her in his arm.

Her admonishment, instead of dissuading his affections, seemed rather to feed them. He hastened to answer: “You are a great influence on me. You have convinced me of my injustices. I will reform. It is in your power to help me achieve this. Allow me to amend my past misdeeds. Give me a single chance and I will prove to you I am in earnest.”

When somewhat calmer he pressed her more gently to himself and said, “If you knew how you tempt me—your hands, I should love to feel their softness.” Reaching down, he took hold of her hand and put it to his cheek, his face almost touching her own, but some inexplicit thing held him from making any attempt, as though he felt threatened by some invisible force. Very slowly, his voice full of supplication, he murmured, “Let me come to your lips. Allow that I should taste them, and I am saved.”

She distressed him deeply by affecting a passive resistance which he detested utterly. Burning with impatience, he said, “I deserve that you should have me. If ever one showing patient waiting and bitter longing, and such faithfulness as to endure the utmost contempt with one devoted thought, deserved being loved, it is the pitiable fool you see before you. Does my long suffering and loyal adherence not strike some sympathetic chord? Has it all been in vain?”

Caressing her fingers with his lips, he murmured, “Awake or asleep, it is your face I see.” He brushed his cheek against her open palm, since she would make no effort to caress him. “There can be no doubt my heart has a capacity for sincere attachment, or I would not have endured all this with such abiding, unalterable love. I have given you all my heart. Will you treat

it tenderly, or shall you cast it beneath your feet and tread over it till it is sore and bleeding?”

Magenta gave no reply, averting her face from his pursuing caresses. “It is not much I ask of you—not much for you, but that little I seek is all the difference between happiness and misery for me. Come, be kind to me, be loving.” He made an attempt to kiss her. “Tempter!” he said and seized her as she tried to elude him. He could compel her and set about proving it.

Deacon rose sharply to his feet. A stab of heat pierced his veins upon the sight of Fraomar forcibly removing her further from view. That he must seek the seclusion of shadows left no doubt as to the nature of his intentions. Theron was on his feet also and said, “Sit down or I will knock you down!”

“He means to harm her!” said Deacon, going livid with rage, and for a moment he was blind. Two men took hold of him with the single purpose of subduing him, in which they soon succeeded. Next to him his cousins had been battered into submission. For one intense moment Deacon became still as Theron went to interpose himself between Magenta and her antagonist.

The hands that had her seized were ridged with painful veins. Fraomar choked with rage and pain. He did not release her, though the torment in his hands was almost intolerable. Instead he struck her, but with his arms he kept her standing. Deacon flinched as though he had taken the blow himself and struggled so violently that the two men holding him almost lost their balance and fell.

Again Fraomar raised his arm, and with such savage intent that Magenta shut her eyes and waited for the blow to fall. At that moment Theron caught and stayed the raised hand. Fraomar’s hold loosened, and she stumbled backward and fell away from him.

“Enough games,” said Theron, throwing down the other man’s hand impatiently. “I don’t care what you do when we return, but I suggest you in the meantime take care. I will have to account for your treatment of her.”

He stooped, hauled Magenta to her feet and tossed her back to his friend as a master would toss a favourite plaything back to his dog. When Theron returned, Deacon said, “If he hurts her you might as well cut my throat this minute, for I will be of no use to you!” He spoke quickly and savagely, his breath erratic and laboured.

Theron gripped the front of his shirt as if he would tear him from the arms that detained him. “Perhaps you consider yourself in a better position then you are in fact. Threaten me—attempt to go astray—and I will not only harm them myself, I will give you the pleasure of watching them beg for death before I’m done.”

That evening the three young men nursed their injured bodies without word or complaint. Hunched over himself, Derek was very quiet. His face was serious. A few beatings had broken him to obedience. He looked at his brother and knew his mind was ever working on a plan of action, yet it seemed so futile. The four of them were entirely at the mercy of these rough men. Deacon was motionless, as if he was cast in stone. At intervals his jaw would clench and life would momentarily sear his eyes. His single focus was the woman who sat helpless in the hands of the enemy. Once or twice during the evening he feared Fraomar would strike her.

With Fraomar’s thick arms around her, Magenta was stifled against his strenuous body. He was bent on making her lean into him. She was tense and held away with contempt and uncertainty, as if she feared what he might next do on impulse. He was unstable and unpredictable, terrifying in his cruel littleness. She became completely silent; he had shown her that any response was but a fresh temptation to him to subdue her, violating her into an isolated sense of herself, where he could hurt her no more.

Her impervious beauty and aloof, conscious inward superiority threw him into a paroxysm of brutal revolt. He could not control her whose spirit no cruelty could subjugate. He wanted to crush her for her cold, sterile beauty.

Intently he watched her, his eyes rarely leaving her face, but she refused to meet his gaze, and always she looked away from him to the other man.

Trying to decipher the meaning of their silent exchanges drove him near insanity.

Fraomar looked on her as a cruel, unforgiving creature. He suffered terribly. Coveting an affection denied, cherishing a hope for a happiness refused, it was enough. His rejected love lay within him as a corpse, embittering and putrefying him, his very soul. A fatal resolve formed in his mind. He thought now to kill her. No longer would she poison his existence. He would be purged of her. But he would do this not before he had made amends for himself. All the pain and misery he had suffered for her would be rewarded in her embrace.

In the night when all but those who kept vigil had retired to their beds, Fraomar left his own. His tempter would be returned home the following morning, and so he no choice but to go to her this hour. Taking advantage of the night's darkness he made his way swiftly. As he neared the desired tent he slowed his steps and approached silently. He saw that the guard who was supposed to keep vigil had abandoned his post and was not to be seen.

"And where go you?" came a careless, unconcerned voice out from the dark. Stepping from behind a tree, lacing his pants, appeared the man keeping watch. "What do you intend that you sweat and grow pale?" he said with an expression of mockery. He was a tall man with a brutally heavy mouth and direct gaze. "Did your previous near-fatal experience teach you nothing?"

Fraomar said in a low voice, "No word of this will be spoken, or you may count upon facing a scene more unfortunate than you can well imagine." But his words, it seemed, were all in vain, for the guard only smiled. Fraomar advanced a step. "Let me render my meaning more specific so there can be no misunderstandings—"

"I don't give a fig for your intentions," said the guard coarsely. "I say, damn the priestesses, curse every last one of them. I should like to see her thrown facedown into the mud—get that pretty dress dirty." He sat down on the wooden stool and bent and lifted the drink that was between his feet in a brutal, coarse fashion. "It's not me who will have to account for any mistreatment. I need only to say you knocked me cold."

“Which will not be a lie, should you provoke me to it,” said Fraomar. “Keep your voice lowered.”

The guard took a sip and waved his hand dismissively. “Go, be damned.” Raising his cup, he said, “Here’s to hoping for the best.” He gulped down a mouthful, muttering, “Mind nothing falls off in the process —I know it puts me off.”

Fraomar, in a sudden, silent fury grasped the man by the scruff of the neck, dashing him against the tree, his forearm pressed against his throat. Though gritted teeth he spat: “Mind your tongue, lest I cut it out.” He released the guard sharply and ordered, “Stand away from here.”

Fraomar wiped the sweat from his brow, and looking to see none watched, he pushed back the sought canvas flap, and silently as a shadow entered the dark, sweetly-scented confines. Magenta, who had not yet closed her eyes for the night, drew herself up to a sitting position, her hair falling loosely round her. With one convulsive movement he had her seized in a frightful grip, crushing her against his body. Her cry was ended in a stifled scream, his hand round her throat. In his clutches, she felt a pang of hot fear in her breast.

“Hush—no noise.” His voice seemed to vibrate fearfully deep inside her. “Remember that you have made an enemy of me.”

His breath muted, he settled himself carefully at her side, and when certain he had rendered her voiceless, gradually loosened his hold. His beard was coarse and damp, so that she shuddered at the light brush of his face against her smooth cheek.

Having her thus close and in his power sent the blood pounding suffocatingly to his head. He trembled with desire and abasement. With a refinement of cruelty he touched her face, brushing his fingers down her white throat, which he thought to be her finest feature. And a horror and dread stirred within her. She strained her face away from him and said, low and tense, “Touch me not.” But fear drained the strength from her voice, so that it scarcely reached her own ear as a whispering of a ghost.

He disregarded her warning, and in spite of her frozen resistance, drew the covers down from her body, holding her in her light gown. Magenta, with eyes closed, hardly breathed. Her very soul cringed from this contact with him, against the feel of his arm around her, but though she resisted him, she dared not repulse him for very fear of him. A frantic movement, an utter of repulsion, would have plunged him into a frenzy of passion in which he would be unsubduable.

His words were spoken on a shuddering breath. “My mercy shall be as sparing as yours for me.” His arm was around her in a fixed position. His chest set against her, hard and unyielding. In this terrible hold he silently, insistently, passed an intrusive hand over her.

It was something near revenge to see the shame and powerless hatred worked in her. She remained motionless, benumbed with rage, apparently scarce knowing what he did, for her face was set blank, her eyes fixed on vacancy. The intense feeling of revulsion could not find vent, and so she sat restrained and recoiled inside herself, wavering between immobility and utter torment, sorely dismayed to find how dead her heart was becoming under his treatment of her.

Nothing was too sacred or too inviolable for his rapacious hands. She had no colour, no sound, wilting within herself, she seemed to fade into emptiness. Yet even now he felt she was untouched. He could feel her wilful resistance set against him. Anger pulsed in his veins, and yet his desire mounted with it. “Even now you would resist me,” he said with the rancour of incredulous fury. As he spoke he passed his thumb cruelly over her lips, sating his eyes on her face which he then turned to press his face into, inhaling the scent of flowers that was uniquely hers, a subtle perfume that sweetened all her body. It made him shudder with an excess of his most violent passions. He half-choked, sick with desire. He grasped her arm to turn her, and she felt herself drawn into his stifling embrace. She could not draw an easy breath, stifled by the hot odour of him, of sweat and leather and yearning.

With steady insistence he pressed her into the ache of his heart, his lips brushing her throat beneath the ear, laying moist kisses down her neck, softly, repulsively soft. It would be many hours till morning, and he felt he

had leisure to give himself full licence, cleaving to the unliving, unfeeling body, the strength of his arms ever-increasing. She was as if crushed. A terrible weakness overcame her limbs, frozen within herself, feeling her heart being killed within her, smothered by the terrible heat of him, a slow irrepressible force that mounted against her.

She closed her eyes, beginning to tremble. Already she could feel him moving in upon her, silent, intent, his arm enfolding her. There was anger in his hands and a destructive strength. The brute blood smothering his veins, he no longer cared to put off his revengeful desires. He set his mouth against her cheek and drew a long, shivering sigh. He spoke with low-toned fervor: “Perceive it necessary for me to do this—consent or refuse—you will be sparing my life.” He clasped her neck and brought her cheek to his and whispered coarsely, “Nothing you have ever bled for will be more worthwhile.”

Desire took him and he was quick to cover her trembling lips with his mouth to relieve the longing. A man’s strength is a terrible and fearful thing when his blood is full of desire and burning inside of him. She made no attempt to struggle nor to prevent him, but even as his mouth moved over hers, his lips and cheek began to turn livid with the hue of death.

With persistent obstinacy he fought through the pain and torment, pushing through the soreness and the burning sweetness that wounded his lips. It seemed the only effect of this act of preservation was to render him more determined in his actions. He put forth every exertion to resist her cruelty, waiting for it to abate. Abruptly, in agony and torment, he suddenly broke from her. Scarcely beneath his breath, he cried with broken frustration, “Cursed woman!” His eyes burned with tears of hate. “You will be the death of me!”

He clamped his hand over her throat, and she was drawn to him in a terrible grip. He regarded the insufferable woman fixedly. Exhausted and defeated, she seemed now to have no power but to look upon his face, which was the image of fury itself, intensified by the emotionlessness of her own expression, which maintained a determined passivity enough to madden any lover. His tormented anger quickly gave way to wretchedness, and his manner toward her again changed, supplicating in his words and

attentions. With an officious hand he brushed the dark hair from her white face. “Someday you will have me.” He panted. He was anxious and determined to be entreated, sickened in his heart with longing. He shifted his weight restlessly and avowed, “Let me come to you, and I will serve you unto death.”

As she spoke her face showed plainly her disgust. “Every feeling of my heart revolts—the embrace of death should be more welcome.” Her heart was hot and pounding convulsively in her breast. He in an instant became hot all over.

“Those were fatal words,” he said, his mouth white. He laid ruthless hands on her and dragged her down to him. In frenzy and agony he clutched at her, without mind, as if driven by some desperate, terrible imperative. Sobs of impotent rage and torment choked her throat and racked her body. His lips breathed wrath, uttering hoarse cries of pain.

He cared little that she now voiced her desperation. Not crying nor struggling could prevent him. Here they were spending their first and last night together. He formed a dagger in his hand. He would cut her throat. But before he could execute that intention, a throttling arm hooked about his throat from behind. He felt himself dragged backward and held, hoarse and restraining shouts in his ear.

At the sounds of her piteous cries, half-smothered and muffled, Theron and another man had at once been alerted to the peril, and laying detaining hands on Fraomar, at last, subdued him.

“Be gone with you!” shouted Theron in a rage. “For pity’s sake what’s wrong with you—you’ll have us all hanged! Out before I toss you out! Go!”

White with rage, Fraomar cast one last glance at her, to which she made no response, drawn inward and choked in fumes of rage and hate and passion.

Chapter 40
Into A Dark Forest

He was known affectionately as Bordan the beast-tamer and was the best huntsman in all of Gonriel. All manner of creatures fled before him. His face was keen as that of a hunter and scarred by the claws of those many he had tamed. His left eye was blind. His form was not fearsome, his build and height no more impressive than an average man, but there was altogether something extraordinary about him, something not to be trifled with. He, along with two other men, was assigned to return the priestess and both brothers to Cheydon.

It was early morning when they prepared to make off. Deacon arose when Magenta finally came into view. There was a singular and mute aspect to her diminished countenance which rage, hatred, and despair had all drained. In her solemnity she was a visage of bleakness and endurance beyond hope, paled and sorrowed by the unleaving of perpetual winter, with no light to ward off the gloom.

Her appearance disturbed and disconcerted him in a way he could not fathom. Her eyes were cast down. He felt severed from her thoughts, a veiling over her mind. When she at last lifted her gaze, she looked at him as if by degrees becoming conscious of him, and a ghost of a smile touched her lips. For a long time they gazed, each upon the other, fearing it was to be the last. She knew as well as he that they would leave him to die.

Bordan led her over to where the others returning to Cheydon awaited them. Presently Fraomar made his appearance. He remained at a distance, holding back from the presence of his companions. Her eyes met his, and he looked away. His set face and stern demeanour told of his aversion and abasement.

From where he stood Deacon watched her, conscious of a tightening deep in his chest at the thought of going out of her life.

She looked back to him and knew what his last unspoken thought was. For a mere moment Bordan turned his attention from her. The love of her heart overwhelmed her, and in an instant she was gone from his side and over to Deacon where she flung herself against him. Breaking down all reserve, she set her lips to his in a long, ardent, soundless kiss in which two beings merge their identity. Before she was removed, she whispered to his ear, “All my thoughts shall be with you, till you are restored to me.”

Deacon, watching after her, did not endeavour to disguise his despair. The ranger assisted her upon his horse. From over her shoulder she gazed back toward her beloved as she was borne away from him.

It was late morning when they made their first stop. Bordan and the two men with him sat and ate before the small fire, while Magenta and the brothers sat together, close at hand. Slinking and lulling about the ranger’s legs, as three cats might around their master, were the large bristling creatures the captives had previously made acquaintance with. He slapped their sides affectionately and fed them pieces of meat, but when he had tired of them put his boot on one of their heads, and giving a cruel push, said, “Go, till I call you.” At his command all three beasts moved off toward the trees in long, languid strides.

Magenta had no intention of returning to Cheydon. She would not leave Deacon to die, not as long as there was life in her body. With a motion too slight to be noticed by the others, she retrieved from her boot a small glass vial. Her eyes lifted to Cedrik with a meaningful look, and he saw, then, that in her hands she held a means of escape.

With a subtle exchange of hands Cedrik took the vial and applied some of its liquid to the rope binding his wrists, as did his brother. The potent substance would burn through and they would be freed. His mind quickly went to work as to what he would do once his bonds were removed. He threw Derek a stealthy glance, indicating he was about to make a break.

Before the rope fibers had quite burned all the way through, Cedrik, applying force suddenly, tore his hands free, and in the same instant made a violent move toward their captors, who, startled and shocked, leapt to attention immediately, hastily groping for their swords. The impetus with

which Cedrik rushed forward bore down the first man, and a sharp blow to the soldier's jaw won him the long keen blade, whereupon the owner quickly died.

Close behind, Derek made a mad dash for an improvised weapon, a heavy branch, which, taking in both hands, he brought against the knee of the other soldier, following the stroke with another across the back of his head with a dull crash. The injured man had not time to regain his feet before Derek was upon him, disarming him. Contrary to his nature, Derek plunged the point into the chest of his foe.

Without a moment lost, he leapt over the campfire, hastening to assist Cedrik, who had met the ranger with a clash of blades. The ranger, confronted with one of the best swordsmen the Imperial had ever produced, was overwhelmed when the younger brother hastened to his side, but backing away, he held his own and called wildly to his pets for aid.

As this took place Magenta did not sit idle but went quickly to work on poisoning several arrow tips. This accomplished, she notched one with the intent to bring down the foe she knew would soon charge upon them. Heeding the call of their master, the beasts came from the trees as with the fury of mad things. Magenta raised the bow smoothly and took aim at the brute nearest. Her arrow shot forward and struck the broad chest with fatal accuracy.

Without delay, she, with precise execution, rapidly sent forth two more poisoned arrows toward the remaining beasts. The poison quickly worked its mischief. Their powerful limbs faltered and stumbled, and at last, came down to rise no more. The ranger fighting against the two men was shortly to meet the same fate, cut down with edge of Cedrik's sword.

After Cedrik had tied a torn piece of cloth round his brother's leg to stop any bleeding, he attended to his own wounds. "I have nothing which will soothe the pain," Magenta said, sympathetically.

"It's all right," said Derek, pressing her hand. "It lets me know I'm living."

Cedrik wiped his face with a dampened cloth and tossed it down. He asked Magenta, “Do you know where it is they take him?”

“I know the name,” she answered. “I know not the location.”

“It matters little.” For a moment he bowed his head against the sweaty forearm that rested across his knee. “There’s no time for us to seek help. They’ll be there and done before anyone can act.”

“What are we to do?” asked Derek.

“We go to his aid.”

“There are fifty or so men, eight of them magic-users.”

Cedrik nodded. “I know. Do you have any fools’ powder left?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“We must wait until very near to the sought item before we make any attempt,” said Magenta. “There they cannot use magic against us.” With that in mind, Cedrik went over the best course of action with them. These preliminaries settled, he rose to his feet, at the same time assisting Magenta to hers. For a moment the three stood close to one another, bound by love and common purpose. Magenta put a hand to both their faces. The strong love she held for them gave rise in her every higher faculty of feeling. She could not help but bestow a kiss on each of their cheeks. They were her family.

After they had taken all they needed from the fallen soldiers, the companions mounted the horses and started off toward the direction they had come from, toward Deacon.

Over a period of several days, Deacon travelled with the enemy. He looked dejected and unresponsive, refusing to answer when they addressed him. His head hung, rarely lifted to survey his surroundings. In time they came to a dense forest. The moss grew here in rough clumps, unexpectedly

thick in places. Strange cries could be heard from unseen sources, yet the men continued undaunted. The forest began to loom and soon enveloped them with its large trees laden in mist, mosses, and clinging plants. They trudged on through this maze, over fallen logs, through apertures between boulders, over streams.

Their trail led them to a clearing, where, amidst the ruins of an old temple, were two great moss-covered statues of men that stood no less then twelve feet high. Facing each other, they clasped their outreached arms, forming an archway over the stone table between their bodies, and upon which sat an ornate silver goblet. There could be no argument that it was an intricate and beautiful sculpture. Encircling the impressive stone table was a tall transparent wall, constructed of pale blue energy. The obstruction prevented any from touching the sacred goblet.

Here amidst all the deep, green splendour the travelling party made camp. All around them, looming in dark places, were the men lost to shadows. Their presence was felt, but they could not be seen. These tortured beings were mere agony in the form of a vague visage, reminiscent of men. The insatiable hunger for power tormented their insubstantial, shadowy existence. Loosely bound to the physical world, they were vapour and shadow.

With an eye almost of hatred, Fraomar wandered about the site, taking in all the magnificent detail. Water still flowed from a half-standing fountain near to a stone altar where the priests of long ago ritualistically laid their dead before burning their bodies to ash. The temple was dedicated to Demise, the Goddess of death. Many believed that those who had erected it still haunted its fallen walls.

The shadows of night began to gather around the men. They felt oppressed by the dampness and were quick to start a fire. Deacon sat solemn and incommunicable, his gaze sweeping over his tormentors. Taking them separately, he could have succeeded in the defeat of each one, but collectively he stood no chance.

Fraomar passed discovering fingers over the great statue. “I despise this place,” he said, his gaze roving over the surroundings. “Can you not feel its

malignant spirit? Evil walks here in discontent, a restless malice, things born of no woman."

Theron whittled a piece of wood. He said, "Must you always be touching things? Sit down; you make me uncomfortable."

Fraomar was disconcerted and would not sit with the others, but stood tensely. His gaze soon settled on Deacon, who looked down absently at his bonds. The mere sight of him provoked Fraomar and made him burn with an anger sharp and unsubduable. With persistent intensity he watched the captive. A sore sense of unfulfilment ever churned in the pit of his stomach.

As if knowing he was watched, Deacon, with dark, defiant eyes, looked up. It was enough. Without warning Fraomar went and took hold of him with aggressive hands. "Damned miserable fool," he said. He threw Deacon to the ground and with his boot gave a kick to his ribs, so sharp Deacon choked and coughed. While he was prostrated still on his hands and knees, the aggressor stood over Deacon, then raised an arm and delivered such a terrible punch his fist withdrew covered with the other man's blood. Deacon felt one side of his face go numb and could taste a silvery bitterness.

"Damn it—no more!" shouted Theron. "He needs strength!"

Fraomar looked up and the blow he meant to deal died. "I don't mean to beat him into immobility," he said, panting, desiring to return to his task.

"Restrain yourself, or I will make efforts to have you quieted." Theron's sharp words held his companion, and he returned to his seat, leaving the other to pick himself up.

Before Fraomar moved away, he looked at Deacon. "I will see you dead before the end." As he spoke he wiped the blood staining the back of his hand over the owner's bruised cheek. Deacon strained his face away, his eyes full of dark rage and hate.

The air was damp and miserable. The scents of brewing coffee and of food cooking over the fire did little to make the forest friendly. Theron set a bowl of hot something before Deacon. When no movement was made

toward it, he said harshly, “You will partake of something, even if I must force it down your throat.”

Deacon ate slowly and without enthusiasm. When he laid his head down and closed his eyes, sweet thoughts and memories settled upon his troubled mind. He clung to them as he would to her own soothing form, yet their very sweetness could have made him weep, and for all the hope he was forever torn.

When morning came he was left to sleep, and all throughout the day none disturbed him. In the heaviness of utter exhaustion Deacon went in and out of sleep, vaguely conscious of the other men and their movement and voices about him. A melancholy and dreariness lay heavy on his heart. He dreamed of her fingers passing through his hair, her breath near and warm. He could hear faintly the sound of water trickling over smooth rock, or perhaps it was gentle rain. When he awoke he lay motionless, his eyes closed. He heard steps approach, and he sat up quietly. The cool, moisture-heavy air made him shudder.

“We do this now,” Theron said gravely, removing the wrist irons. Deacon clenched his jaw and gave a single nod. A dread stirred within him. Theron rested a heavy hand on the young man’s shoulder, “Do not fear,” he said, the gesture a cruel and empty imitation of friendship. “Men die at every hour, and many for far less cause.”

Rage and rebellion worked in Deacon. Pale and silent he got to his feet. It was late afternoon. The light of day had begun slowly to fade, but the last streams broke through the dense vegetation in brilliant effulgence. The men had packed up and prepared their horses ready to flee, not trusting what might occur once the goblet was removed from its place of keeping.

It was with grave solemnity that Deacon approached the formidable statues, Theron and two other men close behind him. White as a man facing the executioner, he raised his open hands toward the energy obstruction, but before he could proceed there was a low swift sound, and a painful cry of the arrow striking its mark. The man next to Deacon collapsed to the ground. An arrow had gone through his throat all the way to the feathers.

Two more fell dead, before any could make a move against their unseen assailants. From the fire they had not yet extinguished there quickly followed an explosion and flaring torrents of flame, which caught alight some of the men who stood too near. They twisted and writhed violently in the damp earth, trying to put out the flames on their bodies. In an instant, all was confusion and turmoil.

Taking advantage of this, Cedrik and Derek rushed forth, swords drawn, headlong, into a fierce battle. Upon the sight of his cousins, Deacon wasted not a moment. He shoved his shoulder into Theron, knocking him down, and jabbed his elbow into the face of the man next to him. Stunned, with a broken nose, the soldier was then grasped and slammed against the hard statue. Deacon took his sword and dagger, and thus armed, rushed into the conflict. He leaped over the body of one foe to throw his weight against another from behind. In the same instant he hurled the dagger from his hand, an action which prevented his youngest cousin's back from being laid open.

Into the face of a soldier Cedrik struck a full blow, and, bringing down his sword, severed the head from its body, even as he turned and directed his point into the chest of another. The soldier made a mangled sound and fell dead. The three young men worked their way closer and closer toward one another, cutting down the enemy without mercy or restraint.

Derek deftly moved his head aside, just as a blade whooshed past and almost took off his ear. "Do not kill them!" shouted Theron wildly, standing back from the commotion, his head pounding with the hot blood of battle.

To gain a better vantage point, Magenta steadily arose from her place of concealment and with a flat back and steady eye, took aim. Her priorities were the rangers, who posed the greater threat. The first man she could take a clear shot at, she put an arrow into, right through the chest. The hit itself had not taken him down, but the poison that began to work through his veins.

Amidst the chaos she became aware of a man coming toward her from the side, slightly behind. Her bow string drawn taut, she turned sharply and released. Her arrow pierced his throat. Unfortunately she had not been

aware of the second man. Quickly he came round behind her and brought her down. As she struggled to rise again, his heavy body fell upon her, pinning her face down so that she might not use her evil against him.

Deacon turned sharply at the sound of her cry and took a blow to his jaw.

The man atop Magenta seized her hair with the intent of smacking her face into the ground, so as to render her senseless, but she had managed to free one hand, grasping his that was entangled in her hair, and with all her force, put into him an infliction of withering. Its effects were immediate. Crying out with pain, he found his fingers stiffening, and he released her. She, however, did not release him. She knew once she got her hands on him it would take a stronger man than him to stop her. Her abilities were not reliant on magical energies. Distended veins ran up his hand and arm and up into his neck. His face became livid, and he toppled dead from her body.

When Theron saw that the two soldiers had failed to bring down the priestess, he hastened to it himself. As Magenta's hand reached for the bow it was kicked from her reach by a heavy boot, and with a back-handed stroke Theron knocked her to the ground. He did not leave it there, but gave a sharp kick to her side. She curled in breathless agony and with a feeble gesture tried to move away from him. Bending down, he seized her arms and she was forced to stand.

Somewhere amidst the violence Deacon came up against Fraomar. With unchecked fury he fell upon the hated man, knocking him to the ground. Forgetting all those around him, Deacon put his weight heavily on the body. The beast had worked its will on Magenta, hurt her, and now he had it in his hold. It was his turn now! His blood pounded his head suffocatingly, like a madness, and with his fist he struck Fraomar full in the face, over and over.

As Derek swung and cut down one of the soldiers he took a blow to the back of the head. He stood up only to be knocked down again. From the corner of his eye Cedrik saw that his brother had been battered down, disarmed, and detained. For a short moment Cedrik continued on but found himself unequal to the task. When he realized the battle was hopeless he reluctantly threw down his weapon in an acknowledgement of defeat.

Deacon remained atop Fraomar, maintaining an unbroken series of blows. A force made of hatred, he struck the bloodied face again and again. As he did this, many hands fell upon him, and after beating him some length, they finally subdued him. Fraomar, badly beaten, staggered to his feet and went to the fountain to put cold water on his wounded face. The sting was so severe he swayed as if he might lose consciousness.

The brothers were bound and tossed to the ground together. Theron half-carried, half-dragged Magenta and threw her down with them. Beaten and bruised, they huddled near her as they would their own sister. Theron choked with outrage, “Damn you, if you move, I’ll—”

His gaze went over to one of his companions, half-reclining against a tree where he had dragged himself. An arrow stuck out from his panting side, his lips stained with the hue of evil. Theron was only a few paces away, but the man was dead before he reached him. In a slow rage, Theron pulled out the arrow. He returned to the captives, and in a sudden outburst of violence, stabbed the broken shaft into Cedrik’s thigh. Cedrik jolted and cried out. Clenching his teeth, he blinked the tears of pain from his eyes.

Panting with an excess of hostility, Theron pointed a warning at Magenta, then moved off, ignoring Derek who shouted wrathful curses till his mouth was silenced with a hard blow.

Theron went to where Deacon lay. “Let us get this over with,” Theron said and dragged him grimly forth. Together the two men stood before the thrumming energy-wall. A low wind ran along the ground, the leaves rolled past, and a sense of foreboding settled over the camp. Slowly Deacon raised his hands, closing his eyes. Magenta watched. Her heart beat with a terror that paralyzed.

There was a shifting in the waiting shadows, and something with no physical body and no mind, but a terrible want, felt the use of power. As it moved it made a low sound like sighing on a breeze. The air turned very cold, and there was a creeping sensation as of some unseen foe drawing near. Out from the darkness of the trees came strange phantoms, clawing along the ground, dragging their shadow forms, which appeared terribly

long, far beyond human scale, their vague human shapes somehow grossly stretched.

These dark spectres, rising as the mists arise, gathered about Deacon, reaching out with greedy anticipation. Behind him, they penetrated through leather and deep into his flesh, drawing no blood, yet his body strained as if every muscle was tightening in reaction. Without a sound he bore their torture on his feet, his head bent down and eyes squeezed shut. Mercilessly they drew from him, and he felt his power along with his life being drained.

Deacon dared not turn his head and look at his tormentors. Always his hands were raised to the energy wall. To sustain the strength and concentration necessary to complete the task took tremendous effort. Only after a few minutes' durance he was weakened. A bead of sweat ran down his strained neck. Momentarily his efforts faltered, and with a painful groan he dropped to one knee, the pain intense. He rose with difficultly. He knew if he fell he would not get back up. Defiantly he went on, though with rapidly diminishing strength.

Cedrik and Derek were half-overcome with fear and horror. There were a dozen of these shadow-like creatures all steeping into Deacon, smothering him in their darkness. Besides the distraught and fixed attention of the captives, there was another no less deeply absorbed.

Fraomar watched with increasing enthusiasm. Again he looked to Magenta and was almost beside himself with malignant and spiteful joy. He saw before him the gratification and accomplishment of long-sought revenge. He only wished he could feel the strength of her misery within his arms. The temptation was too strong and Fraomar went to her.

"Let us have a better view," he said, taking hold of her and standing her on her feet.

"Miserable—Let her alone," Cedrik said through his pain, himself not knowing whether it was a plea or threat. Either way, Fraomar ignored him and took Magenta over closer. He positioned himself behind her, clasping her tightly in his arms, so that he might feel her tremble. From over her shoulder he watched the pitiful spectacle.

The task almost complete, Deacon was barely able to stand. The obstruction came down, and he stumbled backward, ceasing his output of energy. His legs, slack and unsteady, gave way beneath him and he collapsed. The shadow-men, not relinquishing their hold, enshrouded him, as if a black cloud had descended upon him. He seemed to tire and lose courage and tried to crawl away, dragging his body slowly, painfully, as though each limb was heavily encumbered by a great weight.

But they were upon him, forcing his life out of him, devouring both sources within him. There was no escape. Too deprived of energy to fight, he rolled onto his back, struggling as if he might go into convulsions. He was in great agony. He could steal only glimpses at Magenta in his panic. It was as if he was constrained with tight bands, every muscle in his body seized tightly enough to tear painful cries from him. His face expressed such torture that it was terrible to be seen.

Magenta strained against the arms that held her, in agony at the sight before her. She saw that Deacon could not free himself and broke into earnest attempts to disengage herself. Her pleas and desperate implorations went unanswered, and none made any attempt to deliver the sufferer from his torment. Theron went quickly to retrieve the sacred artifact. Nervously he took it into his possession and with haste went for his horse. As he passed Fraomar he said, “We have it, let us go!”

“Wait. I want to see this!” was the quick reply. He still gripped the woman hard and detained her.

Writhing under the torture of their touch, Deacon had no thought of his coming death. He could feel nothing but the pain. His strength failed him, and he felt he had nothing left in his body to go on with. His violent actions suddenly died into stillness and he became limp, lifted only by the sheer force of their assault. His life, extracted from him, ran in a stream towards them. The internal force was so great that blood began to spill from his mouth. He seemed to be losing consciousness.

Magenta ceased her struggle and became motionless. Her heart stood still within her. His life seemed like a flame flickering out before her eyes,

as if he was fading out of existence. A look of affliction came over her despaired features. “He’s dying.” She scarcely breathed the words.

Theron tucked the artifact away into one of the horse’s saddle bags as if it was nothing more than a mere trinket. He caught the reins of the horse and looked over his shoulder, his voice bare with command, “Fraomar, bring her!”

In an instant Theron’s blood ran cold. There was a terrible, thunderous sound, much as if something large was being uprooted. All at once the two great stone men became animated with life. The soldiers staggered backward in horror as one swung its massive fist with such colossal force that the tree it collided with shattered into splitters, as if it were brittle and aged a thousand years.

Knowing what it was they sought, Theron mounted the horse and made off with the treasure in haste. His companions remained to fend off the colossal foe. One of the men, slashing frantically with his blade, fell to a crushing death. His efforts had done little to halt the impervious forms of the giants, who struck out mightily, smashing and shattering all in their path. They smote with powerful blows, causing havoc and fear in the hearts of the soldiers, fighting with the constant will of dead men.

Among the scatter and confusion, the mangled screams and cries, Cedrik and Derek got to their feet. As his brother was unable to do so, Derek began to kick the wooden picket that they were tethered to with hard consecutive blows, hoping to avoid the crushing impetus of the giant’s swinging arms. Fortunately, it seemed, the stone men were interested in a single target—the one fleeing, and only those that deliberately stood in the way were removed.

Fraomar did not enter into the conflict, but, stumbling back, clung to his captive, determined to watch the last thread of life grow thin and sever from the body of Deacon. All the commotion and chaos about Magenta dissolved from sight and mind and faded into nothingness. Her focus bent upon the writhing form. In the confusion of her mind came the start of a small hope. Forgotten words whispered slowly to her consciousness; the words she had heard her father speak.

Recollection began to build within her, and with it a stronger ambition. Her gaze fell to where one of the poisoned arrows lay within reach. Fear and her love for the man dying gave her strength; with all her force she broke free of Fraomar's hold. Before he could clench her again she darted forward and seized the arrow. He lurched violently and grasped her arm, but ere he could make a move to prevent it, she turned and drove the arrow up into his chest.

A look of shock and of pain crossed his features. Grasping her still, and without looking down, he clutched the shaft and dragged at it. Magenta watched in horror as he tore it out, and with a savage gesture tossed it aside. In a paroxysm of wrath he pulled her to him and made a sudden violent, jerking movement. She felt a sharp pain stab her side. Slowly she looked down. She did not see the instrument which he used to wound her, but she watched with detached interest as blood began to soak through her dress and stain her fingers.

Fraomar choked and gagged as if unable to swallow. A tremulousness took possession of his nerves, making him quiver uncontrollably, which was a sign the poison had begun to work its evil in his blood. Groping to clutch her, his knees buckled beneath him and brought him to the ground, choking. Blood-stained froth bubbled to his lips; his face contorted with a look of fear and confusion. The pull of his frantic grasping, and the weakness she felt in her bled limbs, almost brought her down with him.

As she looked upon his face, his utter wretchedness, she could not help but feel a pang of bitter pity for the creature that seemed had no empathy to spare the feelings of himself or others. She tore away from the clutching hands and fled toward Deacon. Any emotion of fear for herself was excluded by the deeply fixed fear of losing him.

Having lost his support, Fraomar pitched forward into the dirt, writhing in utter agony. A rageful gurgle spluttered up from his throat as he watched, half-blinded, the retreating form of the woman he loved and hated fling herself across the body of the man who had stolen her from him. All his bitterness and all his hatred boiled up, and his end came in one awful, hideous convulsion.

Laying herself over Deacon, shielding his body with her own, Magenta spoke the words she prayed would protect him. A radiating force of concentrated energy came from somewhere deep inside her and engulfed their two bodies momentarily in sheer brilliance. She clung to him, waiting for the darkness to disperse and release its hold.

She was as if pressed down by a force that would not lift, and for a terrible instant she feared they would not leave. She could feel his assaulted form being jolted and torn up from the ground. Then suddenly, all at once, they were dispelled, gone back into shadow and darkness. His body became absolutely still beneath her. Closing her eyes, she rested her cheek against his slightly breathing chest, spent and exhausted. The lingering energy suffused them with a soft, tender glow.

After some length, Deacon stirred. Gradually he became conscious of the warmth and heaviness of someone lying across his body. Progressively the darkness lifted from his eyes, and they soon opened. All was quiet. None of their foe were to be seen. They had either fled or been killed. Their bodies were scattered about the forest floor. The stone men also were gone.

Deacon lay heavy and fatigued. Weakly, he lifted his head to look down at Magenta. He wanted to see her. She did not rouse when he touched her hair, and he felt that something was very wrong. He struggled to raise himself, then sank back down. He had barely any strength. Again he touched her head, the top of which brushed his chin, and murmured her name, but she did not stir. Sick with terror, he closed his arms round her, and with effort rolled her weight off his body, gently laying her flat. He, in turn, lay across her.

She remained motionless, looking up at him, her breath faint. The instant he beheld her white face he was stricken with the certainty that she was dying. He made a wounded sound above her and choked out her name. Looking down at his wet fingers, he found them covered with blood, which he discovered gushed out from her pierced side. His hand shook as he pressed it firmly against her, trying to staunch the bleeding. Her trembling lips seemed to part, but no sound issued forth.

“Hush, hush,” he whispered. He did not want her to be afraid. Smothering his fear and choking on his grief, he caressed her softly. “It’s all right,” he soothed. “You will be all right.” As if he had no belief in his own words, broken plaintive sounds issued from him. Tears trembled in his eyes. They held hers with desperate intensity, as if so long as their connection remained she could not pass away from him. He spoke again with something of pleading in his tone. “Look, we are no longer apart, but together. I am here to be with you at last and always.”

She could only return his gaze, sorrowfully and in silence. A tender and wistful smile half-parted her lips. He knew she was past the point of being able to speak. There was a frightened look in his eyes. The same fear seized him as had his first grief.

“It must not be,” he said in a broken voice. “You cannot leave me. Do not die. You must not die, not now. What shall I do without you?” The very tissue of his aching heart was wounded and damaged by the coming of death. He gathered her to him, holding her as firmly as his strength allowed. His fingers wandered over her cheek piteously. Her name came to his lips in a quiet sob.

It seemed she was staring beyond him into eternity. Trembling, he lowered his face until his lips were on hers lightly, but lingeringly. Then drawing back he gazed into her face once more, seeing it dimly through tears. A pale unearthly beauty had overspread it, and she was gazing with those open, unconscious eyes. It seemed that the last kindle of life was dying.

At last freed, Cedrik and Derek were hurrying toward them, when the older brother suddenly halted and put out his arm, preventing the other from going further. Something in the situation impressed him with a sense of fatality. Together they stood watching, helpless and struck motionless.

In his embrace Magenta seemed slowly to pass from him. All life seemed gone out of her. There was no motion, not even the slight tremble which he had felt shudder in her frame. Her heart had slowed to an almost imperceptible pulse, and all bodily functions that were not required began to close down. Her breath softened to an undetectable whisper. Her body

making an attempt to restore itself, she entered a state where the deep unconscious mind was invoked to repair and regenerate, diverting all energy to preserve life.

In this state of healing, she passed into an oblivion that appeared like death. Her delicate features assumed a deathlike pallor. No sign of life was visible in her body nor face. The progress was strangely gentle, so gradual Deacon could scarce believe that this was life passing into death. Yet her face was pale, unchanging and unmoving. Her eyes slowly closed, and it appeared as if she had fallen into a repose so profound it could end only in death. In whispered anguish he repeated her name again and again, stroking her cheek as if to stir in her the sign of life which he asked for, but she lay in a deep state from which it was impossible for him to rouse her.

At the precise moment he saw that she was gone from him, he felt his heart die within him, and, with unutterable anguish, he stared into her lifeless face till he trembled with sorrow. All at once his seared, ruined heart released him from this transfixion. His face broke, and in a sudden burst of grief, his head slowly bent down, choking on the tears that came upon him suddenly and violently.

When Cedrik saw this he closed his mouth and eyes, overcome by a sense of loss. Next to him stood Derek, who reflected his despair. After a moment they started toward their cousin, but stopped. With a sob of effort, Deacon staggered to his feet, trying to lift the limp form into his arms. The embrace with which he tried to clasp her was unsuccessful. He could not carry her. With an earnest persistence that was heart-rending to witness, he fought against his weariness, attempting to drag her, proudly choking back the tears. His expression was a piteous contrast to the helpless gesture.

“Help me!” he cried. Notes of desperation broke his voice. “Don’t let her be left here.” He sobbed with the excessive effort.

Cedrik and Derek looked on helplessly. He had not got far when he groaned like a goaded beast and collapsed, as if any prolonged exertion was beyond his power. On his knees, with bowed head, he clutched her against himself, her body partly supported by his encircling arms, her deathly form wan, but lovely. He drew his breath in suffocating shudders, whimpering

with bitter pleas to the gods to restore her to him. He cradled her gently and clung so tenderly that for long minutes the two watching stood away.

Presently Cedrik came to stand by him, and for a moment could not speak. He laid a sympathetic hand on Deacon, and said, in a low utterance, “Save your strength. We shall return her to the earth tomorrow.”

Deacon clenched his teeth but did not look up. He could have struck him down for those words. “You’ll not touch her,” he said, thrusting him aside. “I would sooner burn her!”

For several minutes Cedrik preserved a respectful silence, then crouched down. “Will you let me see the extent of your injury?” Cedrik attempted once to turn him, then left him there. Like some wounded animal, Deacon would not let any separate him from the death-like form to which he clung.

“Don’t touch her! You’ll not put her in the ground.”

“You’re bleeding,” Cedrik pleaded.

“It’s not mine, it’s hers.” Burying his face against her, he broke down altogether, sobbing despondent words. Cedrik arose and stood a moment at a loss. His cousin’s grief moved him to tears. Soon Cedrik went away, leaving him still sitting there on the ground, bent over.

The night had set in dark and mournful. Not knowing what else to do, Cedrik started a fire. He said not a word, stricken with the same grief as Derek. They did not want to remain here but were too weary to move on. The shadowy presences, lurking in the darkness, posed no threat, but feeling their ever-present evil added to the weight of their already burdened hearts. Often their gazes went over to Deacon, but neither dared approach him. Alone and despondent with exhausted grief, he was as motionless as the form he lay beside. He had the look of a man who had been robbed of his last motive for existence. His face was set, lifeless and with resignation, as though he awaited his own death.

Lying here, he was left with the anguish of consciousness, while she was lost deep in oblivion. He continued to gaze upon the unearthly loveliness. Its mysterious appearance of life with no consciousness in it possessed him with a feeling that in this state she would endlessly endure, in this changeless unawakening repose, and he would be left alone. He could not endure the thought of his loneliness. He hid his face against her. Deep strong sobs convulsed his body.

Half the night Deacon remained in this condition of lifelessness. Every now and then his frame would shudder. This was a great relief to Cedrik, to see there was life in him still. Cedrik could not sleep, but kept close observation of his cousin.

His brother, who had unwillingly fallen into an unhappy somnolence, lay near to him. Sometime late in the night, exhaustion weighing heavily, Cedrik closed his eyes briefly. He didn’t realize it, but he must have slept, if only for a few minutes, for when he opened his eyes he discovered that though Magenta remained, Deacon was gone. His cloak was draped over her, as if she was merely sleeping.

Tree of Life

Part II

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